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Home sweet home: achieving belonging and engagement in online learning spaces

Lee Leewis, Senior Digital Learning Coordinator and Stacey Leigh Ross, Associate Lecturer, London College of Communication

Abstract
In October 2021, Lee Leewis and Stacey Leigh Ross started a conversation about Ross' creation and delivery of online teaching to forty-five Year 2 BA Design Management students on the Design Management and Change (DMC) unit at London College of Communication (LCC). This discussion would last all term and lead to a theory of teaching in virtual environments that combines elements of place-making and self-determination theory. In the article below, the authors recount the development of that theory and how it manifested in a wildly popular Miro board. They contend that a connection to 'place' and the people within it is key to understanding what makes some virtual environments flourish more than others. As the dialogue unfolds, the authors speculate that successful virtual learning environments are spaces which encourage connection, co-creation, and shared ownership.

Keywords
virtual placemaking; self-determination theory; belonging; student engagement; Miro; digital learning

Background
Academic year 2021–22 was the first time that Stacey taught this unit, which is completely online. She designed and facilitated six of the unit's twelve five-hour sessions to fulfil broad curriculum themes like 'Sustainability & Cultural Change' and 'Decolonising Design Thinking'. Her online workshops prompted students to have fun imagining, questioning, investigating and creating knowledge individually and together. Stacey has only ever met one of her DMC students in real life.

Key
DMC: Design Management and Change (DMC) unit
SLR: Stacey Leigh Ross
LL: Lee Leewis

Dialogue
SLR: You know that Miro board I was telling you about? I've got three sessions on it now. The formative assessment, too… so they add work weekly and then their summative case study feels less intimidating, like they've written most of it already. Also, it's easier if everything is in one place – notes, comments, feedback, references, ideas from each session...

LL: That's fantastic! Can I see the board? Glad I converted you to Miro, but what made you choose it ultimately?

SLR: I wanted students to be able to work together more… flexibly.

LL: Whoa! Look how much is on this board! Are all the students using it?

SLR: Most... We use it in every class. If I talk at them, they'll switch off, so I get them to populate the board with me. Each session starts with some music and mystery - parts of the board are hidden behind panels, then I reveal each activity as we move through the lesson.

LL: I like that. You get students thinking creatively and creating content for later discussions. This one's great - "It's the year 4000 and human beings have evolved to the point where we have no mouths. How do we get nutrients?" (Fig 1.)

Figure 1: 'It's the Year 4000', activity by Ross (2021). Content by DMC Students 2021-22. Image: Ross and Leewis (2021).

Figure 2: 'Dig Deeper Questions', activity by Ross (2021). Image: Ross and Leewis (2021).

SLR: You saw the Dig Deeper questions? (Figure 2). It was all fun and games until I revealed those. Then students with similar solutions organically formed groups, discussing implications for stakeholders and giving feedback.

LL: All synchronously?

SLR: Actually, I got notifications showing activity at night and on weekends. It's their space. There's a 'Hot off the Press' section (Figure 3) where everyone adds interesting resources, opportunities, or links connected to our lessons. They add stuff, I add stuff. It keeps the board alive.
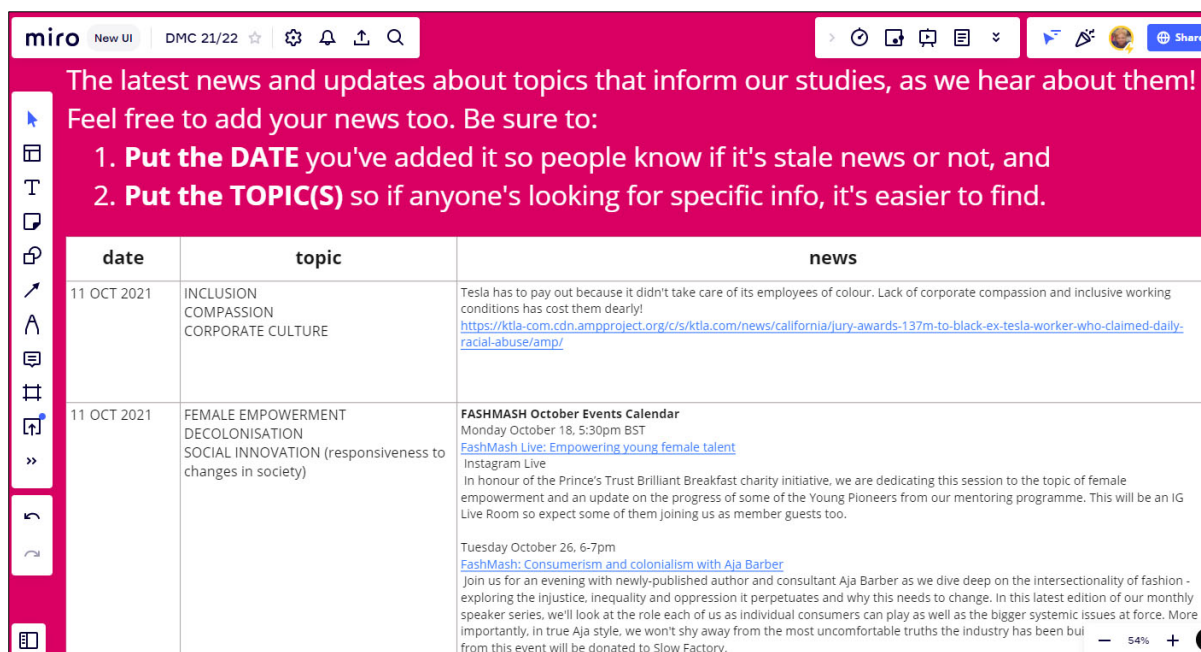

Figure 3: 'Hot Off the Press', table by Ross (2021). Content by Ross and DMC Students 2021-22. Image: Ross and Leewis (2021).

LL: They obviously feel right at home! Do you know how special this is? You've managed to build a virtual community out of a Miro board where your students have the freedom to be themselves, explore, and build meaningful relationships. Which reminds me, have you heard of self-determination theory?

SLR: Nope.

LL: Self-determination theory suggests that our motivation to learn is driven by our desire for competence, autonomy and relatedness. Competence is our desire for self-efficacy and self-development; autonomy is our need for independence and agency; and relatedness is our desire for connection to people and ideas (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

SLR: Oh! So when I give the students a space like 'Hot Off the Press' or a row in a table that spans each week on the course (Figure 4), that's like giving them autonomy over their own space. I've basically given them their own room to decorate and populate as they choose. And relatedness happens when they work in groups to build empathy maps (Figure 5) or create a reference board that shares ways to decolonize their thinking (Figure 6).
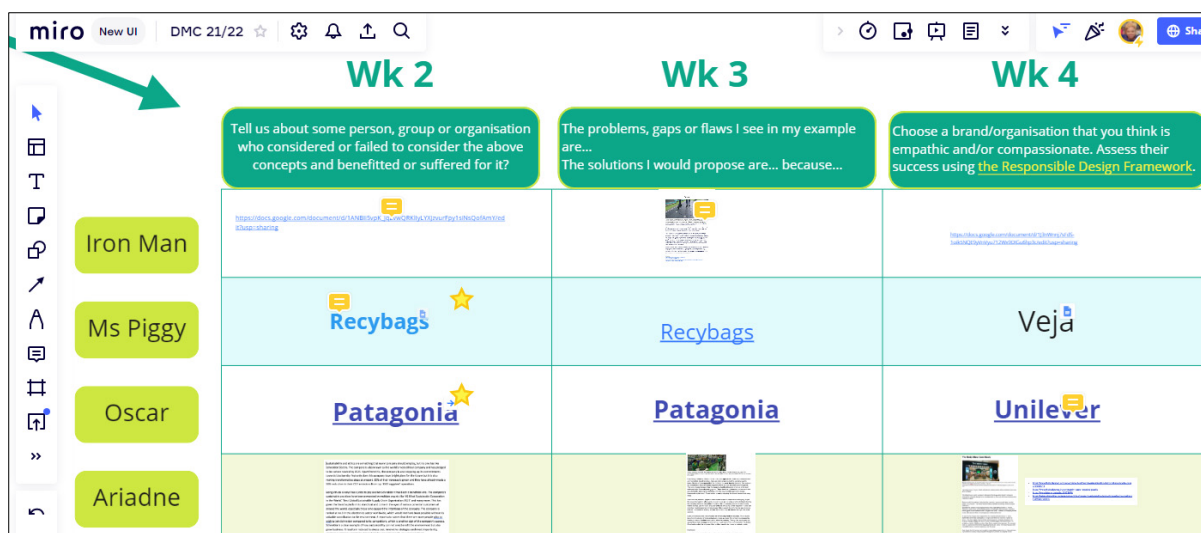
Figure 4: 'Allocated Space'. Each participant owns a row and adds weekly contributions for feedback using OneDrive and Google Drive links or embedded PDFs (student names have been anonymised). Table by Ross(2021). Content by DMC Students 2021-22. Image: Ross and Leewis (2021).

LL: Absolutely! It's also a result of getting to know other people and feeling comfortable enough to be yourself. That's why I love your warm-up activities, you get students to participate in fun, low-stakes activities and drop their social masks before you relate it back to the lesson and their own lived experience.

SLR: But it's more than that. Having students chat on BB Collaborate while using Miro helps them feel like they are in the same studio space working around a table together. That builds community. This idea of making a homebase where we meet or create, that's placemaking, but virtual.

LL: Placemaking?

SLR: Placemaking started in architecture and urban design. It's about creating a shared vision for the needs and uses of a physical space (Tibbitt, 2017). Not sure about *virtual* placemaking though.

LL: Wait, I read an article about this! David White (2021) describes the relationship between presence, place, and community in online spaces and quotes anthropologist Marc Augé's ideas about non-places, or spaces where individuals feel lonely and disconnected. In contrasting the physical campus to the zoom classroom, David writes that many digital environments feel like 'non-places', but your Miro board is the opposite. You really see and feel the presence of others, and that you inhabit a shared world, with shared social references. I think your Miro board mixes the personal and the communal in ways that help your students feel more socially and emotionally connected to those who share that space with them. Have you considered presenting your board at the Practice Sharing Day?

Figure 5: 'Empathy Maps for Design Management Students', activity by Ross (2021). Content by DMC Students 2021-22. Image: Ross and Leewis (2021).

SLR: Digital learning? Me? How about we present together? I'll bring the teaching and learning; you bring the digital and theory.

LL: Are you kidding, I'd love to!

Figure 6: 'What could you do to decolonise yourself?', activity by Ross (2021). Content by DMC Students 2021-22. Image: Ross and Leewis (2021).

Some weeks later

LL: I've been thinking about our last discussion and the nature of belonging in online spaces. If co-presence is key to feeling connected with others in virtual environments, should building student-to-student relationships take precedence over student-to-tutor relationships?

SLR: I think you must develop all the relationships, but the onus to facilitate those connections is on the teacher.

LL: Even so, we can't connect with others if the space feels uninviting or inhibiting.

SLR: Mmmm. Let's do a mash-up... the teacher nurtures the teacher-student, student-student and student-space relationships until they become self-sustaining. A strong teacher-student relationship ensures some ability to control, guide, or steer the learning experience. I'm wary of the word 'control'… though this does play into the idea that teaching is performance in some ways (Lahey, 2016). A teacher 'orchestrates' the student/audience response. To some extent, we have to, but does a meaningful purposeful gathering need a leader? Now the relationship with the space… that's crucial to strengthening teacher-student and student-student relationships. It's the location to meet, to gather and explore. Priya Parker (2019) says we make the best connections when we gather for a shared purpose. That really fits here. The space supports our purpose. It becomes essential to how we achieve it. So our relationship with the space becomes just as important.

LL: You created an online learning space where students and teachers create, refine, and share knowledge – together. That reminds me of the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison *et al*, 2000). These communities rely on three kinds of presence – cognitive presence, or critical engagement and reflection, social presence, or the ability of students to be themselves around others, and teacher presence, which is to facilitate meaningful student-student, student-teacher, and student-course content interactions.

SLR: I agree, but I would change the student-course relationship to student-space. Hear me out. The teacher-student, student-student, and student-space relationships are all initiated and cultivated by the teacher i.e. we provide the soil, water, nice big pot, sunny spot... but the growing is done by the students in the space. We only facilitate the entangling of leaves (student-student) or climbing the trellis (student to physical/emotional/mental space). Though… I learned loads from my DMC students. I used the references they shared and explored best practice from brands they introduced.

LL: The whole board becomes greater than the sum of its parts!

SLR: Yep! And their Miro has links to Moodle, Google Docs, One Drive, YouTube, websites… We work on it while we're in BlackBoard Collaborate. It's like home. You leave all your stuff there and you know where to find it when you return. It's why students feel comfortable enough to host group meetings there, even when we aren't in class. They feel a sense of ownership over the space… like having a physical studio in college. All their stuff is there. They know who belongs in their space and who doesn't.

LL: Like Ryan and Deci's (2000) concept of autonomy, where our motivation to learn is partially driven by our need for independence and agency?

SLR: Almost. Students don't only have control over themselves but the space and the learning content. They're even helping to build the lessons too. There are parts of the board where the lesson wouldn't work without their input.

LL: Okay, if not autonomy what about ownership? Your students share ownership over the learning process, the learning space, their interactions, even the content. To me, ownership combines the Ryan and Deci's concept of autonomy and competence by enabling students to choose how and what they use to express themselves. Miro is ideally suited for this because it gives students the creative freedom to add images, links, videos, even entire websites to the board. But it doesn't have to be Miro. We simply need to find the opportunities that exist within the platforms we already use to give students that same sense of agency and independence.

SLR: There are spaces on the board where students work collaboratively and spaces that are entirely their own, but whether they're working together or independently what gives them a sense of ownership is the feeling that their contributions are helping to construct the learning environment and add value to everyone else's experience. That reminds me of Peter Felten's concept of 'Mattering' (2019), which is like belonging but focuses on the feeling of being significant and important to other people. On that note, we should consider how relationships factor into rapidly developing theory, particularly teacher-student, student-student, student-space relationships. Maybe it's like self-determination theory's relatedness?

LL: I don't think that covers the relationship with space though, just people.

SLR: People need a space to be present in (White, 2021). Maybe connection… to each other, the subject, and the space?

LL: I like that. Our theory so far is that successful virtual environments are spaces where students feel a shared sense of connection and ownership. But it's often what we do in a space that connects us to it. In your board, each student's contribution is helping to construct the learning space. What would you call that?

SLR: Collaboration?

LL: Co-creation?

SLR: I like co-creation. We co-create the board, the space, and each lesson together. I can't cultivate any relationship unless they actively cultivate with me. I can bring the infrastructure but without their input, it's just an empty space and a sequence of ideas for a lesson.

LL: True. OK, so our model has three key goals: ownership, connection and co-creation. Does one of them need to come first? And what if someone else were to run with this model? Would it work?
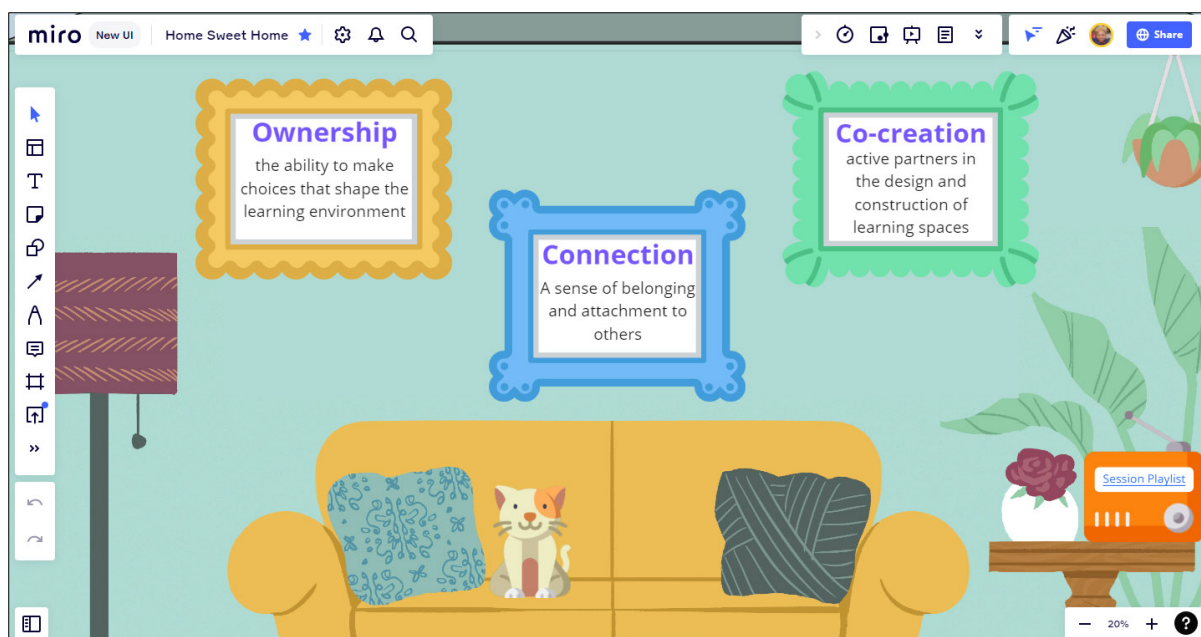
Figure 7: 'Definitions of key goals', by Leewis (2021). Image: Ross and Leewis (2021).

SLR: Not sure. If ownership, co-creation and connection were clinically applied… no? The teacher creates the climate, nurturing the three relationships to realise the three goals. I play music to remove that "teacher talk, student listen" formality. I'm often dancing in my chair, making it squeak. I know some of them shake their heads and laugh, but some dance as well (they've confessed). It really reduces the distance between us.

LL: So, the teacher-student connection comes first. If that relationship is strong, you can strengthen student-student, student-space, and student-subject connections. And you're building that with…

SLR: Love!

LL: Authenticity?

Both: [laughter]

SLR: Academia often snubs love and emotions…we study and think rather than reflect and feel. You know, during the last DMC session students said we love your approach, what we say matters to you, you really care about us as people, you teach more than a lesson, you want us to succeed in our careers.

LL: You cried, didn't you?

Both: [laughter]

SLR: I guess that's love, flowing both ways and… authenticity?

LL: You showed them who you are, and they felt safe to engage with you and everything you put forward. Another teacher might not use music or personal anecdotes, but if their approach is just as genuine and authentic, our theory should work.

SLR: Ok then. Next step? Run it past our academic peers then test it out with students. I think we have the beginnings of something new!

Conclusion

The working theory is that belonging and engagement flourish in virtual learning environments where teachers cultivate three key relationships (teacher-student, student-student, student-space) to achieve three key goals: connection, ownership and co-creation. The authors are in the process of interviewing students to better understand their experience of online learning and whether these concepts apply. They will publish this work in a later journal article.

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Biographies

Lee Leewis is the Senior Digital Learning Coordinator at LCC. He has an MA in Educational Technology from University College London, where he studied machine learning systems that support

self-regulated learning. His interest in this paper's subject stems from his research on using digital platforms to enhance learning autonomy and engagement.

Stacey Leigh Ross is an Associate Lecturer and doctoral researcher at LCC. She has an MA in Applied Imagination and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Stacey's pedagogy centres play, curiosity, critical thinking and inclusive practice. Her PhD is entitled, 'Carnival of Compassion - How can the euphoric "instant community" feeling inherent in Caribbean Carnivals be recreated in an art intervention to predispose its participants to compassionate action?'. Stacey's research with Lee advances her practice and research into virtual learning spaces – essential for effective post-lockdown teaching, and for any online engagement with her practice-PhD.