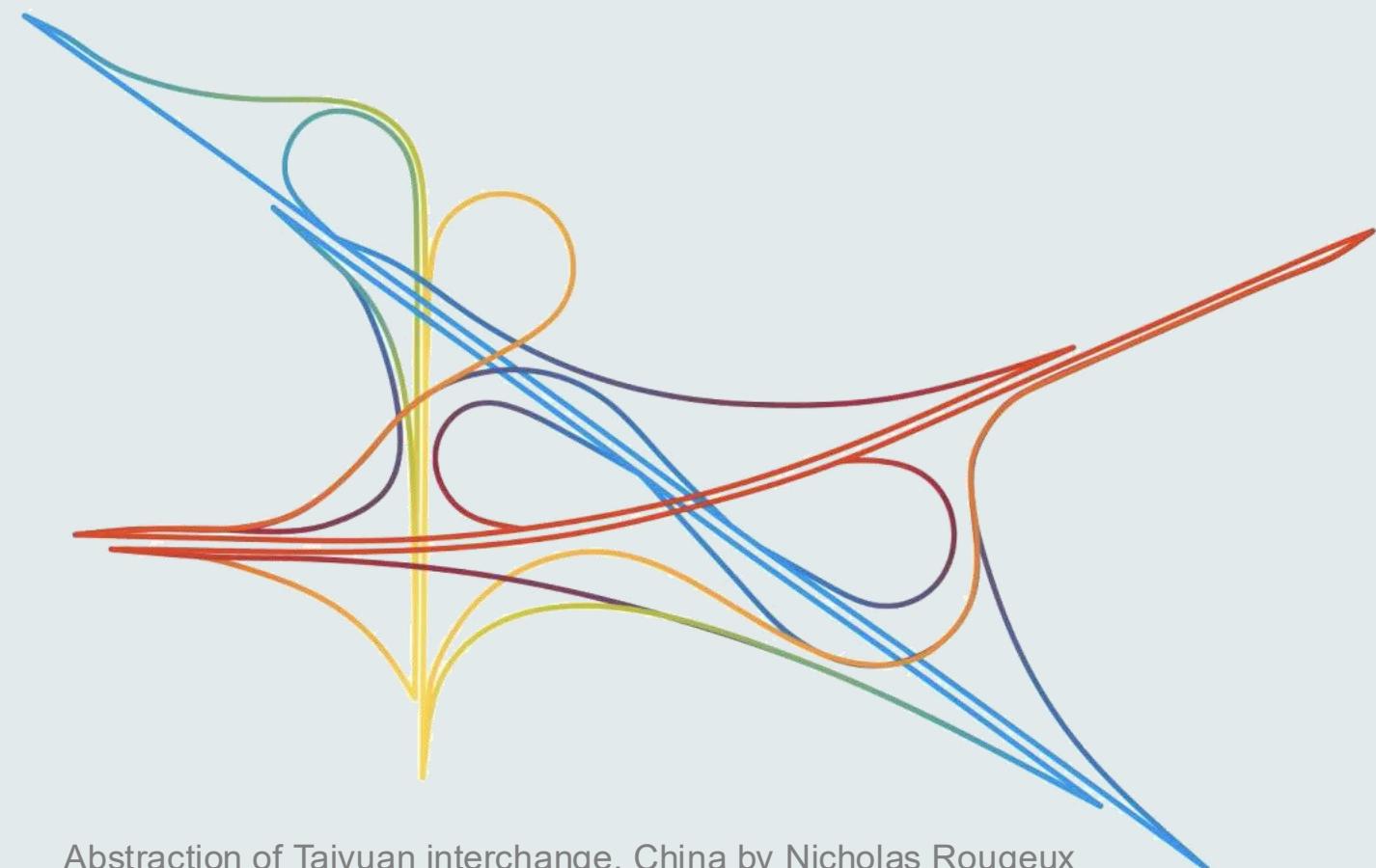


'Interchange': how might reciprocal support be used to construct a sense of belonging and community between students at different stages of their degree?

A mentoring programme between third and first-year Fine Art Photography students.

Claire Undy, January 2026



Abstraction of Taiyuan interchange, China by Nicholas Rougeux

Context and motivation

- My role is First Year Leader in BA Fine Art Photography at Camberwell. I have a particular interest in student wellbeing, disability support and community building.
- Recent building works have exacerbated an existing lack of integration between year groups on our course.
- I have focused on issues of 'belonging', why this is important, and how it might be achieved.
- My initial goal was to introduce a mentoring scheme, to build links between first and third-year students, to encourage knowledge exchange and community.



Interchange

Building links between first and final year students to encourage knowledge exchange and community.

Gain teaching experience, support new students and benefit from the assistance of the first year at the installation of your final show.

Third year students are invited to join by signing up for three sessions:

- Wednesday 15th October, 2-4pm – Introductory workshop
- Tuesday 2nd December, 2-4pm – First-year crit
- Wednesday 28th January, 2-4pm – Assessment preparation tutorials

Please speak to Melinda or Claire to sign-up.

'Belonging is not merely a pathway to retention, it is a constellation of relations, intimately entangled with identities, becoming and learning'. Ajjawi, R. & Gravett, K. (2021)

Design of project

- All first years took part in the project, but participation was voluntary for third-years, many of whom were busy with dissertations.
- I designed a reciprocal exchange, where third-years would gain teaching experience and degree show support in exchange for working with the first years.

Session 1 - Introductions, induction activity, Q&A

Session 2 - Year 3 to lead small group crits with Year 1

Session 3 - Year 3 to lead 1-2-1 tutorials with Year 1
(late January)



Image of group crit in Interchange Session 2.

'Intentionally facilitate peer support and mutual self-help in your courses... focussing on peer support is an integral way to foster community'. Imad, M. (2022)

Change of focus

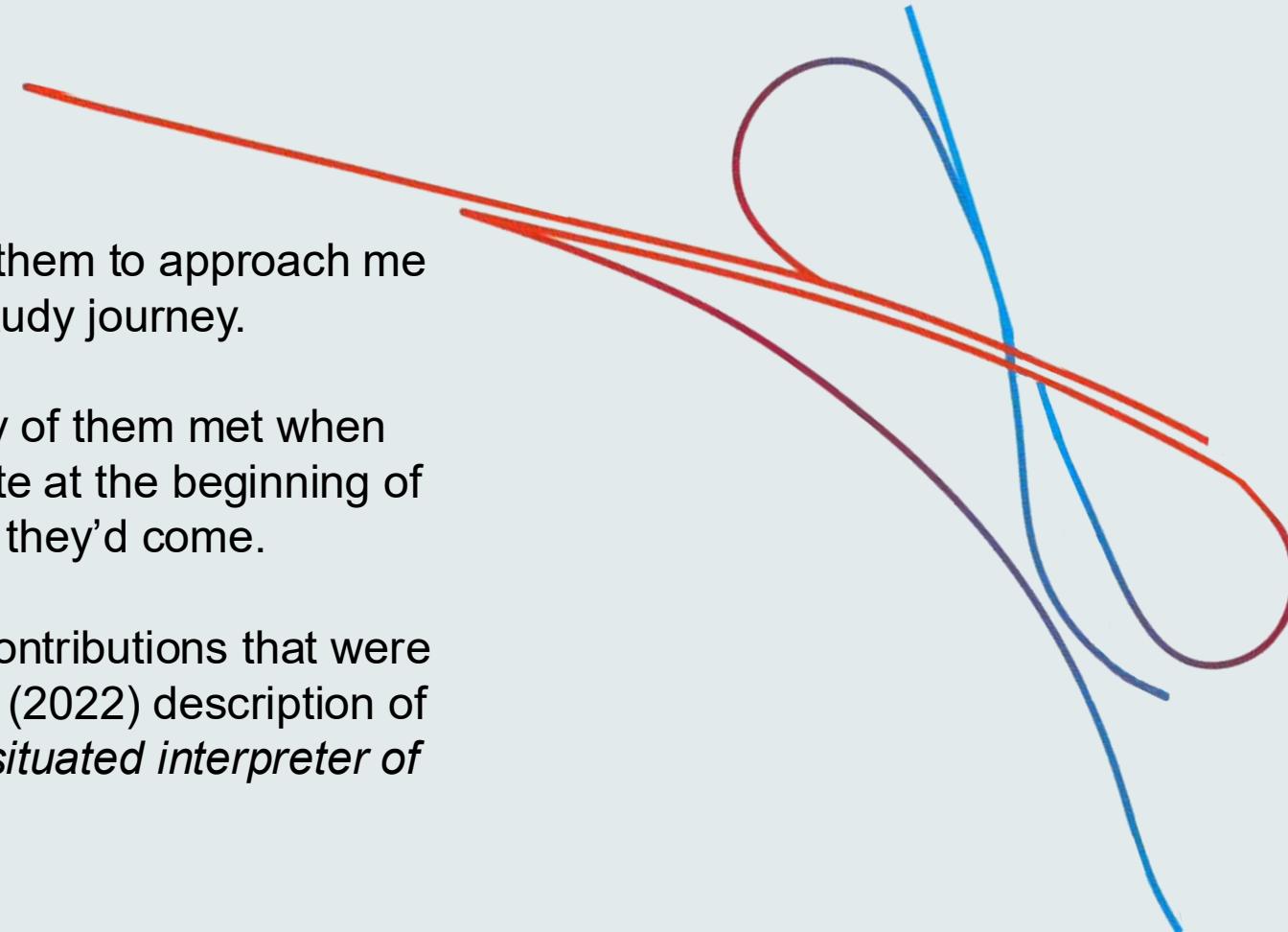
- An initial concern was incentivising third-year participation, but I found surprisingly high interest.
- Unexpectedly, most third-year participants had struggled at some point on the course and discussed how they wanted to use this experience to help others.
- I changed focus at this point as I was interested to discover more about how connecting to personal experience might allow mentoring to be more meaningful for third-years.



'Using our own experience as an example, we are both theorists and consultants.' Wenger-Trayner, et al (2014)

My role within the research

- Briefing the project to Year 3 prompted many of them to approach me to share their own personal stories about their study journey.
- As First Year Leader, I was the first person many of them met when arriving at university, and this seemed to resonate at the beginning of the third year, when they looked back at how far they'd come.
- I was conscious of how my role influenced the contributions that were being made, which reflected Braun and Clarke's (2022) description of the researcher within qualitative research as a '*situated interpreter of meaning*'.



'Narrative inquiry foregrounds the interactions between researcher and research participants and fostering reciprocity in research relationships'. Akoto (2013), cited in Timmis et all (2024)

Research methods

- I initially gathered data through observations and a questionnaire for participants at the end of each session.
- However these didn't fully reflect the 'story' I was observing, so I arranged interviews with third-year participants about their experiences of belonging and mentoring to bring narrative inquiry to my research.
- Braun & Clarke's guide to Thematic Analysis helped to identify codes within my findings.
- Conclusions were drawn from a combination of these sources, subjective understanding of the participants and reading 'between the lines' of what they said to me.

Feeling isolated or different to the majority
Desire to make friends and connections
Developing professional skills
Negative personal experiences
Positive personal experiences
Desire to improve things for others
Lack of knowledge or confidence
Suggestions for improvement

Codes for thematic analysis of interviews.

Observations should be considered as a '*montage ... a method of editing cinematic images, where several different images are superimposed onto one another*' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 6, quoted in Jones, Holmes, Macrae & Maclure, 2010.)

Findings

- Coding revealed themes pairing together – for example, negative feedback and suggestions for improvement were often coupled with comments about lacking confidence, suggesting parts of the programme where students had felt more vulnerable and needed more support.

Student G (name redacted) 2:32

So it was fun. I think the way the session was set up was quite lively and quite engaging and gave me a leadership role in terms of going around and doing the treasure hunt. They seemed quite eager to ask me some questions and I think the session would have benefited from us sitting down in a group before we set off for the treasure hunt kind of doing like, oh, innate like names like where you're from like. Maybe something like maybe something you're interested in at the moment, like a favourite artist or some sort of little prompt there so that we could chat and get to know each other ever so briefly before we then went out and we were walking and talking. But yeah, it was fun, even with maybe some of the shyer students they seemed to be interested in talking to me. I feel like I did have to be, like, my more extrovert self, which I don't mind doing every so often. Yeah, I found it valuable and a good way to break up my day as well. I feel like I was having... that day... I was having, maybe not one of my best days. So then to go and interact with, like, some fresh faces actually really helped me.

Explicit codes:

Suggestions for improvement (didn't feel introductions were sufficient).

Desire to make friends and connections.

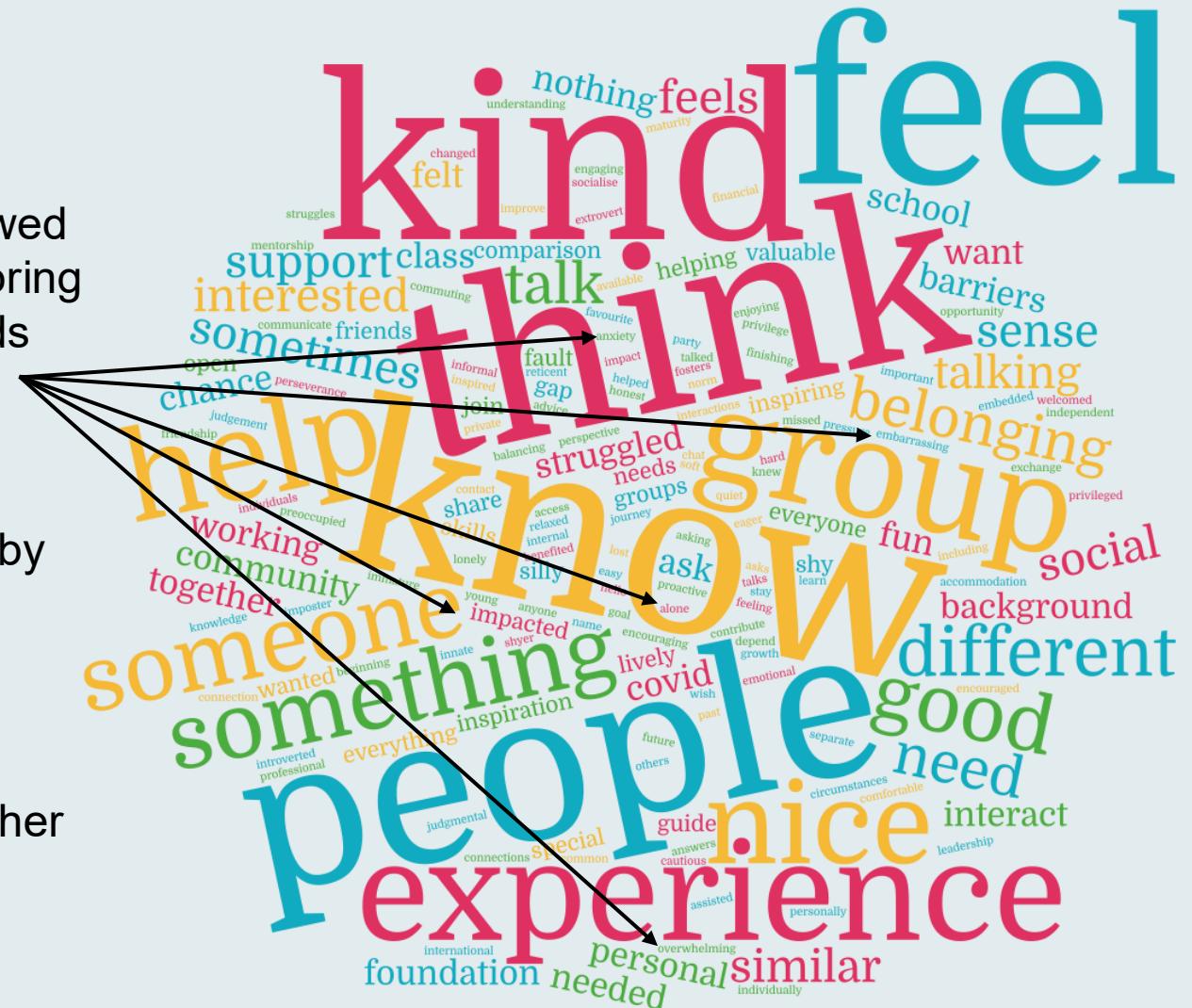
Implicit code:

Feeling shy and uncomfortable.

'Making connections and belonging was emotional, exposing students to a level of vulnerability.'
Ajjawi, R., Gravett, K., & O'Shea, S. (2023).

Findings

- Putting interview results into a word cloud showed the expected themes when discussing a mentoring programme, but often the most significant words were difficult to say and appeared very small. 
- I was surprised by how frequently a desire to make friends and connections was mentioned by final-year students.
- It could be interpreted that final-year students have as much need for support making social connections as first-years and are perhaps further inhibited by a sense they should have already 'succeeded' at this.



'I posit sense of belonging as a basic human need ... a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group'. Strayhorn T. L. (2019).

Reflections

- Sharing difficult personal experiences in order to support new students can help third years recognise their own personal development. Contributing towards a ‘bigger picture’ on a course helps increase feelings of belonging and self-worth.
- This must be navigated carefully as some students feel embarrassed about areas such as socialising, that they may not feel they have been ‘successful’ at.
- Therefore, mentoring programmes may be most impactful if done with care at a smaller scale and individual level, as this offers the potential to form stronger links between students.

‘If it’s once... it’s already meaningful’

Student P

Interview comment from third-year, who found social connection with compatriot through Interchange programme.

‘Students described wanting to have and make purposeful and meaningful connections with the university community ... for a broader purpose ... feeling like they were contributing to something communal beyond themselves as individuals’. (Ajjawi, Gravett, & O’Shea 2023).

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