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Belonging as a responsive strategy in times of supercomplexity and change

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Abstract

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Since 2011 the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University has been actively supporting an ethos of belonging throughout their learning and teaching. In 2017 'belonging' became a formal university priority, embedded in the institution's strategy and dispersed across Colleges and Schools through a range of activities and interventions. However, in the supercomplex COVID-19 landscape, practices of belonging are being reconsidered and reimagined for online learning environments. This paper outlines some of the reasons why belonging should be prioritised during times of intense change and complexity. We outline a range of responsive initiatives that have assisted staff and students as they rapidly shifted to a learning and teaching environment. Indeed, given our grounding in the field of media and communication, we seek to demonstrate that embracing supercomplexity through a disciplinary focus can in fact be productive for staff and students alike. Through this discussion we demonstrate how a belonging strategy at the institutional level can be translated as embedded practice at the level of the discipline and within micro-level classroom interventions.

Practitioner Notes

1. This paper provides comprehensive a definition of belonging sourced from a diverse range disciplines
2. We then provide international context on how belonging is defined within the higher education and sector.
3. The paper demonstrates the importance of institutional support for belonging in higher education.
4. We provide evidence that The Belonging Narrative Model and 2017 RMIT Belonging Strategies can be read as tools to navigate the supercomplexity that defines the contemporary university.
5. Two grassroots and easily transferable case study examples of embedded belonging practices appropriate for both face-to-face and online learning are provided.

Keywords

sense of belonging, COVID-19, supercomplexity, embedded practice, belonging drivers

Introduction

The Belonging Project began in 2011 as a learning and teaching project aimed at improving student engagement in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne. The project, bound by the theoretical concept of belonging, grew from collaborative work undertaken within the school to develop and document a common pedagogical approach and create a unified learning and teaching narrative for staff and students.

In 2017, the project initiators were invited by the university's Deputy Vice Chancellor Education to 'scale up' The Belonging Project's findings and to develop a whole of institution approach to activate a sense of belonging across all aspects of the institution. The initial Belonging Project (2011-2015) had demonstrated how an ethos of belonging could be embedded across formal and informal curriculum activities throughout the entire student life cycle and by using small-scale, low-cost initiatives and interventions had encouraged and delivered a range of positive interactions between staff and students and to provide real life employability outcomes and establish skills critical for lifelong learning and success (Morison et al., 2013; Araujo et al., 2014; Araujo et al., 2015; Clarke & Wilson, 2016). To scale the project across the vast multi-sector institution, whilst maintaining its direct links to grassroots disciplinary teaching required new strategies and approaches.

In this paper we outline the way in which our approach to belonging as an active, embedded, and continuous process enables us to translate to the idea from a theoretical concept and idealised psychosocial state into a range of transferable and embedded curricular initiatives designed to build connection and community. We discuss how this conceptualisation and application of belonging can be read as a response to the condition of supercomplexity and the current status of the contemporary university as proposed by Barnett (2012; 2014; Samalavičius, 2018). Further, we argue that disciplines and professions represented in the School of Media and Communication, situated as they are within the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) more broadly, are ideally placed to respond to these contemporary social, economic, and political problems, as such complexity has always been a part of our disciplinary identities, methods, and objectives.

We end the paper by outlining the strategies we implemented throughout the COVID19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 to support both staff and students to maintain a sense of connection and engagement and by doing so demonstrate the continuing currency and value of the concept of belonging in higher education as the sector works to reconceptualise and rebuild the value proposition of universities and reimagined ideals of campus life.

A working definition of 'belonging' in higher education

Although a specific conceptualisation of 'belonging' is notoriously difficult to pinpoint (see for example Campbell 2021; Allen et al. 2020) it is most often defined as a feeling of emotional attachment, of feeling 'at home' and of 'feeling safe' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197). Ideas of 'belonging' first came to prominence as a concept when it appeared in the third tier, alongside love, in Abraham Maslow's well-known *Hierarchy of needs* published in 1954 (Maslow, 1954). Within the field of psychology, belongingness is most often defined as fundamental human need whereby humans are driven to form 'significant interpersonal relationships' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 487).

In 2013, Mahar et al., completed a transdisciplinary literature review of belonging and after identifying over 8000 unique abstracts where the term 'belonging' appeared they summarise that a sense of belonging

... was often referred to as a personal feeling or perception of an individual as they related to or interacted with others, a group, or a system that was separate from an individual's actions, behaviour or social participation. Feeling needed, important, integral, valued, respected or feeling in harmony with the group or system characterized most definitions of belonging (Mahar et al., 2013, p. 1029).

The failure to belong through the formation of close human connections is aligned with poor health, ill adjustment, and lack of well-being, often leading to feelings of “isolation, alienation, and loneliness” (Mellor et al., 2008, p. 21).

It is worth noting that one does not automatically feel a sense of belonging to a place, identity, or group of people merely by being born in a certain location or within a particular cultural context — rather it is through action and ordinary regular interactions that a sense of belonging is constructed and maintained. Belonging is “built up and grows out of everyday practices” (Antonsich, 2010, p. 645). Belonging also exhibits a political dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion relating to those who feel like they belong and those who do not (Antonsich, 2010, p. 645). Although the politics of belonging often involves two opposing sides and a process of negotiation is always in place “either at the individual or at the collective scale or both” (p. 650). A sense of belonging is a dynamic concept that operates across many dimensions in a person's life and as a result is fluid and is susceptible to change at any time.

Extensive research has demonstrated that belonging is highly applicable to higher education, and that deliberate and focused approaches to activating, and maintaining, a sense of belonging for students can have a significant positive impact on transition and retention, learning outcomes, engagement, wellbeing, and organisational advocacy (Tinto, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Walton et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Morison et al., 2013; Ribera et al., 2017).

When applied within higher education contexts belonging has often been associated with attempts to address the lack of cultural and institutional capital of vulnerable student cohorts, usually based on ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or first-year transitioning status (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Ribera et al. 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2016). Campbell (2021) argues that belonging is best conceptualised as a meta-construct, and a key intangible asset in higher education. Similarly, in Australia belonging in higher education has been most readily linked to research on the first-year experience (FYE) and first year retention. In 2010, based on the work of Krause (2005), Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) identified belonging as one of the three principles driving Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) influential university-wide approach for the FYE.

These days, as the concept continues to gain momentum across the sector, there has been growing recognition that all students, at any stage of their academic career, benefit from appropriately targeted interventions designed to foster belonging. Creating the conditions to help foster a sense of belonging amongst students in order to facilitate student success, student wellbeing and retention is now regularly recommended by the UK's Advance Higher Education and Australia's National Centre for the Study of Equity in Higher Education (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021).

In their 2021 paper, Allen et al. also suggest that belonging is a “dynamic feeling and experience” (p. 5), one that is deeply connected to the social systems in which individuals find themselves. The researchers (Allen et al., 2021) then map four components that can combine to support (or not) a sense of belonging. These components – worth noting here due to their immediate applicability to the Higher Education (HE) student setting – include competencies (skills/abilities) for belonging, opportunities to belong, motivations to belonging, and perceptions of belonging (Allen et al., 2020, p. 5). Importantly for our purposes here, Allen et al. (2020) note that these four components work as a “dynamic social system... [to] reinforce

and influence one another over time, as a person moves through different social, environmental, and temporal contexts and experiences” (pp. 5-6). In the shifting social and educational environment of COVID-19, it is unsurprising that students’ capacities and motivations for belonging were severely reduced, alongside the opportunities on offer (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021).

Belonging as a student engagement issue in higher education must also be understood in relation to the broader political and economic conditions within which the industry operates. Nigel Thrift (2016) says of the post-WW2 university: “what was unabashedly a pursuit for elites has become a system for educating the mass of the middle class” (p. 401). One consequence of this change is a much larger university, in both staff and student numbers; another consequence is that universities have become more “businesslike”, so that “economicality has become a habit” (Thrift, 2016, p. 405). One marker of this “economicality” (a phrase Thrift borrows from Timothy Mitchell, 2014) is a hunger for measurement – such as journal rankings and “field of research” codes – which in turn become used as a rationale for funding priorities and decisions.

In 2020, as most local universities faced severe economic shortfalls due to the impact of COVID-19 on student numbers and budgets, the Australian federal government introduced the Job-ready Graduates Package. This legislation introduced new funding arrangements which, in short, have substantially driven up the cost for students of humanities and social sciences degrees – the broad field in which our project sits. Within this broader political and historical context, student belonging as a metric for success (of student recruitment, student engagement, student attrition and graduate outcomes) becomes an important part of measuring one of the key activities of the contemporary university – that is, teaching. However, as well as being *part of* the economic rationality in which universities operate, belonging as a strategy also *responds to* and attempts to remedy some elements of this rationality. That is, a sense of belonging becomes even more important for students in an era of a larger and – to use Thrift’s (2016) term – more “businesslike” university.

Belonging as a response to supercomplexity

Ronald Barnett (2012, 2014) argues that the contemporary university needs to be the understood as part of the broader political, economic, and epistemological conditions in which it is situated, and that these conditions are *supercomplex*. In other words, the contemporary world is “complex, unstable and uncertain, and presents with multiple and conflicting readings of a situation” (Barnett in Samalavičius, 2018, p. 22). In times of supercomplexity, according to Barnett (2012) the world itself becomes radically unknowable, its challenges not just complex, but unable to ever be resolved. Or, in other words, supercomplexity produces “a multiplication of incompatible differences of interpretation” (2012, p. 67). Further, Barnett argues that this supercomplexity is “intrinsic to the modern conception of the university”:

That we have both multiple and competing interpretations of the world before us and that we have a sense that interpretations of the world are now infinite: all this, in part, is down to the Western university fulfilling the brief that has been set before it; in short, the project of critical enlightenment. (p. 67).

In this environment Barnett seeks the best curriculum to tackle this unknowable world. He argues that amid supercomplexity, “*the educational task is primarily an ontological task*” (p. 69 – original emphasis). By this he means that education in a supercomplex world needs to address not just ways of knowing (disciplinary epistemology) but ways of being (ontologies). He attempts to map out a pedagogy for the self, for the human being – requiring “open ontologies for an unknown world” (p. 72). According to Barnett (2012): “this is a curriculum that is aimed at the transformation of human being; nothing less” (p. 74).

Of relevance to The Belonging Project and our grounding as HASS disciplines is Barnett's statement (in Samalavičius, 2018) that the Humanities can no longer rely on generic assertions of critical thinking and broad connections to democracy. Rather, the humanities need to be more interdisciplinary, working with and across disciplines in order to address social problems. This is something that resonates with our Belonging Narrative Model, as we outline in more detail below. However, it is worth noting that we have historically thought of our model, project, and disciplinary identities as emerging from and responding to a world of supercomplexity – although, one we have typically described through the language of *wicked problems*. Originally proposed as a concept in the field of design through the work of design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973), wicked problems were defined as “as a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision-makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing” (Earl & Levya-de la Hiz, 2021, p. 582).

What Barnett's supercomplexity adds to the concept of wicked problems is the epistemological element. According to danah boyd (2018), the contemporary university needs to be able to respond to the complexities of increasingly divided communities and polities by teaching “across epistemologies”. That is, it is no longer enough to simply claim one universal truth accessible only through access to ‘critical thinking’. What is necessary in a supercomplex world, a world saturated with wicked problems and diverse epistemological positions from which to navigate them, is the ability to think openly across such problems and divides. In this environment, Barnett's (2012) claim that teaching disciplinary epistemology is inadequate, and that what is needed instead is an education of ontological being, resonates – both within the disciplinary space from which we approach belonging, and as represented in the Narrative Model we developed.

The Belonging Narrative Model of Student Engagement

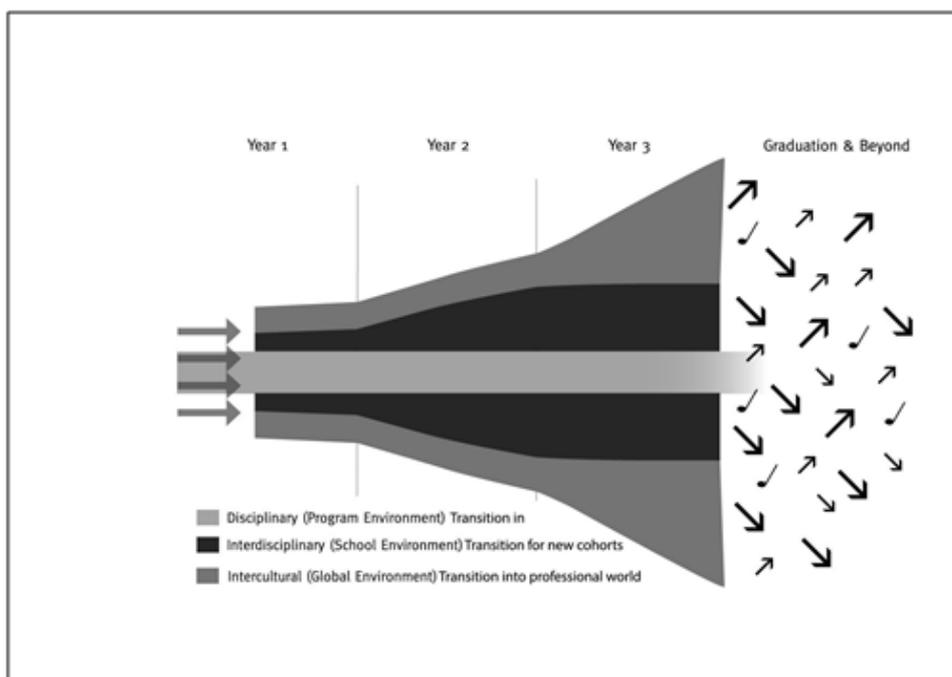
Developing the Belonging Narrative Model of Student Engagement was one of the first tasks of the Belonging Project, emerging during its initial stage as a learning and teaching research project located in the School of Media and Communication 2011-2015. The model maps the three-year undergraduate student experience across three key concerns or domains: tier one the disciplinary or program environment, tier two expands to the interdisciplinary environment which finally leads to tier three broadening to a global intercultural environment. This tiered approach was concurrently mapped to the three-year student lifecycle and viewed each student's sense of identity and belonging as developing incrementally across the course of their undergraduate degree program (Figure 1). The model was designed to be flexible, adaptable, and transferable.

Figure 1
The three-tiered approach to the student experience

Capacity is built incrementally through:	
Tier One: <i>Disciplinary</i>	Students establish a strong disciplinary and professional base within a diverse disciplinary cohort .
Tier Two: <i>Interdisciplinary</i>	Building on the disciplinary base, students become more aware of the interdisciplinary community of the wider school and university .
Tier Three: <i>Global</i>	Students test their disciplinary and interdisciplinary identity and knowledge through working in a wider world of intercultural and global links and experiences and identify as professional, employable and ethical global citizens .

The model (Figure 2) proposed that students initially identify most strongly with their program cohort, thus research within the first tier focuses on building connections (within their year and across-year groups) supporting the development of disciplinary and professional identity. In the second tier, as students begin to make sense of their discipline in relation to other disciplines, research focuses on creating collaborative interventions within a rich interdisciplinary environment. In the final tier, students start to think of themselves as future professionals within a global and intercultural context, thus research focuses on facilitating global intercultural experiences. In combination, this three-tiered approach offers a flexible means to support students to develop their identity as professional, employable, and ethical global citizens.

Figure 2
The Belonging Narrative Model



In line with the project model, The Belonging Project approach acknowledged that universities are spaces where value is co-created by consumers within complex frameworks of actors and resources (Karpen, Hall, Katsoulidis & Cam, 2011). Students are positioned as co-creators of their university experience and are actively engaged in change as a means to empower their experience.

This model can be usefully transposed onto and indeed extended by Barnett's (2012) concept of pedagogies for supercomplexity. While we conceived of a narrative model that began at the level of the discipline and program, extended through the interdisciplinary environment of the school, and reached its crescendo in the broader global environment, Barnett's pedagogy for supercomplexity proposes the development of an ontology beyond disciplinary boundaries. Barnett's (2012) four "pedagogical options" range from disciplinary initiation in which the knowledge field is considered a given, through generic skills, disciplinary wonder (and uncertainty) to the fourth and final position of the "human being as such", requiring "open ontologies for an unknown world" (p. 72). It is this final position that Barnett argues is necessary to tackle a world of supercomplexity, and the one that offers the most potential to extend the final tier of our model.

It is important to note that The Belonging Project and resultant strategy was – albeit inadvertently – an attempt to create a framework and a set of actions precisely to respond to the supercomplexity Barnett describes. Our recent engagement with Barnett's argument has only deepened our understanding of the relationship between our disciplinary identity, our project and supercomplexity. It is similarly important to note that our disciplines and professions (represented within our School of Media and Communication) themselves emerged in the post-World War Two era of heightened change and complexity and therefore they are set up precisely to grapple with complex worlds and their problems (for further discussion of the development of cultural studies, taken to be analogous to media and communication studies, see Couldry, 2000). What our Belonging Narrative Model offers in response to these complex worlds and problems, beyond pedagogies, is the ability to provide an overarching narrative context – we are storytellers after all – for the many pieces of good teaching that already exist but are dispersed within a large institutional setting.

The RMIT Belonging Strategy and the Five Drivers of Belonging

We have long argued that fostering a sense of belonging within higher education is most effective when activated within the classroom and disciplinary contexts (Morieson et al., 2013; Araujo et al., 2014; Araujo et al., 2015; Clarke & Wilson, 2016; Wilson et al. 2018 a & b). However, when developing 2017 RMIT Belonging Strategy it was important to test these assumptions. Through a highly consultative process whereby we utilised the methods of co-creation and rigorous engagement with staff and stakeholders across the university, five drivers of belonging were identified. These drivers were specifically selected as they represented domains over which the university, through focused activities and direct interventions, has some influence to change and, in turn, measure.

The drivers identified through this consultation process and two large scale surveys amongst both staff and student populations were: (a) learning experiences; (b) social networks; (c) physical and digital spaces; (d) extra-curricular activities; and (e) student services.

The student responses to the survey were also used to determine driver weightings and to inform an 'index' of belonging. Of most relevance to this paper is the response to the question, "How important are the following experiences in making you feel like you belong at RMIT?" the driver which was identified as having the highest weighting and therefore the greatest potential for impact around student engagement was 'learning experiences' (25.5 %), with 'extracurricular activities' and 'social networks' following closely with a weighting each of 23.5% (Wilson et al., 2018b).

Within the strategy we determined that ‘learning experiences’ and ‘social networks’ are primarily related and activated through the curriculum and therefore directed influenced by teaching activities. Whereas ‘extracurricular activities’ and ‘physical and digital spaces’ (17.5%) are largely covered by interventions offered through the Student Services (10%) division of the university (see Wilson et al., 2018a & 2018b for further details on the formation of the strategy). This resonates with the more recent work of Allen et al. (2020) who identify four components for belonging (as outlined above). Of their four components, competencies and opportunities for belonging can be fostered most easily within the classroom through the activation of learning experiences and social networks. However, the other two components – motivations and perceptions of belonging – are more difficult to target through the curriculum and point to deeper structural issues underpinning student belonging (or lack thereof).

In designing the Belonging Strategy, we also piloted several curricula-based initiatives including Belonging Program Workshops and Curriculum Specific Belonging Initiatives (CSBIs). The workshops allowed staff from the participating programs to discuss and share their individual strategies for fostering belonging in their individual classrooms and resulted in co-created program maps where opportunities for belonging were occurring across the student lifecycle and to identify any gaps that needed addressing. This mapping then enabled facilitators to direct program staff to additional resources that might support their new ideas and to point them toward the archive of best practice examples of belonging in the curriculum in the form of CSBI case studies (Wilson et al., 2018a & 2018b).

It was through these direct interventions with large numbers of staff across the institution, alongside the development of a staff professional development micro-credential that guide staff in identifying opportunities to help foster a sense of belonging; the inclusion of a devoted belonging stream within the university’s annual learning and teaching conference; the development of a teaching award focused on belonging and, the establishment of the role of school belonging champions and leads that we have been able to influence the idea that belonging at RMIT is everybody's business.

Maintaining a sense of belonging during COVID-19

It has been well documented in the popular press that no other city in the world has experienced as many days in government mandated COVID-19 stay at home lockdowns as Melbourne, Australia (Wahlquist, 2021). As a result, all universities located in Melbourne have experienced two full academic years of remote online teaching. This swift ‘enforced online migration’ to emergency remote teaching (Watermeyer et al., 2020, p. 9) resulted in many staff searching for tips and tricks on how best to maintain meaningful connection, build community and foster engagement with their online classes. As Campbell (2020) points out: “online learners in a new and potentially alienating environment, remote from the physical campus and separated physically from their peers, seem to be especially in need of a sense of belonging.” (pp. 3-4). As teaching staff, this was acutely obvious to us as well when we witnessed a significant contraction in inter-school staff engagement as staff directed most of their attention to their highly localised teaching teams within their individual programs and schools. Although invitations to professional development sessions were initially extended to staff from multiple schools, we found our colleagues only had enough bandwidth to engage with people they had an existing working relationship with. The fact that the RMIT Belonging Strategy identified learning experiences and social networks as the main way in which our students foster a sense of belonging allowed us to feel confident in redirecting resources and professional development to these localised ‘back to basics’ or ‘belonging in the classroom’ approaches. In this next section we outline two of the initiatives that were instigated to support the fostering of belonging in lockdown within the School of Media and Communication.

Informal Learning and Teaching Support Sessions - Teachers@Work

As indicated above, we focused on utilising the tools and relationships we had to hand to support belonging for both staff and students. One of these tools was an existing workshop series within the School of Media and Communication branded 'Teachers@Work'. Run by our colleague Dr Brigid Magner, the award-winning, informal, and irregular seminar series was flexible enough to adapt to the changing needs of staff, while having a familiar brand to draw staff who are interested in the practice and discipline of learning and teaching.

Over the last two years we co-delivered a series of 'just in time' sessions that focused primarily on how to build belonging, connection, community, and engagement between and with, staff and students in the online learning environment. Session titles have included 'Creating an Online Oasis'; 'Creating Space for Open Dialogue'; 'Teachers are People Too'; 'Teachers@Work – Cuppa Catch Ups'; 'Coping with Lockdown Teaching' and 'Teaching the Pandemic Generation'.

Each facilitated session was an opportunity for staff to simultaneously debrief in a safe space, to troubleshoot, and to share tips and tools for use in classrooms in the next few days (or weeks) of teaching. Following each session, the shared suggestions were documented and shared via our internal learning and teaching SharePoint. This sharing of ideas by and for teachers has proven invaluable and in turn provided space for staff to experience a sense connection and belonging for themselves.

One of the micro-level classroom suggestions to emerge were 'early and late arrival of staff' in the online space to approximate the wait outside the classroom or walk back to the train station after a class when attending face-to-face classes on campus. We were reassured to see how this important strategy of 'early' arrival' within the online learning environment was also explored recent article by Tice et al. (2021). Another useful suggestion was making use of the white board function within the online learning platform, allowing students to make anonymous notes or questions at key points during the class, to express concerns and difficulties without having to identify themselves or put on their camera. Others tackled the tendency for students to attend class without switching on their camera by operating a system in which all students were required to take a turn with their cameras on, in groups of four, switching every 25 minutes (see Michaels et al., 2022, for further details of this 'fishbowl' strategy).

Indeed, many staff concluded that without any other element of the usual university experience on offer, and with most of the academic content pre-recorded and accessible to students at any time via the learning platform, online tutorials and workshops became a space solely for supporting student belonging. In this environment, staff leaned on their existing arsenal of teaching and belonging strategies, including ice breakers, buddy systems, study groups, group work, and informal discussion. They also made use of the technology that was available to them by quizzing the students with informal polls, using the chat, emojis, break-out groups and the whiteboard (either inbuilt in the learning platform, or via a third-party app such as Miro). In a learning and teaching environment in which belonging has been consistently foregrounded as a priority, many staff had a substantial range of strategies to lean on during this challenging time. Our informal learning and teaching support sessions allowed for further sharing of these strategies, along with support and camaraderie for staff, many of whom were also struggling with the sudden shift to remote work.

Formal Learning and Teaching Support Sessions – Lunch Time Bites

Alongside these just-in-time, informal, teaching-staff-led sessions, our learning and teaching advisors and learning designer colleagues also ran regular workshops under the banner of 'belonging online'. Similarly timed to coincide with the start and middle of semester, these

online workshops were designed to provide practical and easily adaptable examples of activities staff could use to immediately foster belonging in their classes. It is safe to say almost all the strategies suggested during these sessions were adaptations of ideas that most of us would generally consider 'good teaching practice'. The ideas included a range of simple and fun exercises to 'get to know your students' throughout the semester, the formalisation of weekly check-ins, promoting the importance of personalisation and kindness in classroom interactions, how to use backgrounds and virtual environments to promote interaction, and how to shamelessly exploit your pets and children to engender student engagement.

One of most effective tools for building belonging during the long Melbourne lockdowns was the weekly check-in framework formulated by another of our School of Media and Communication colleagues, Tracy O'Shaughnessy, introduced to the community at a Lunchtime Bites session in July 2020. Rather than asking the same question each week, O'Shaughnessy suggested structuring them around three themes: (a) personal; (b) wellbeing; and (c) interests. Students were informed of the 'rules of engagement' in the first class and cameras were encouraged when talking (technical issues withstanding) if only for this part of the class. The other rules were:

- everyone present shares
- teacher randomly selects the speaker
- teacher always goes first to model behaviour
- teacher keeps camera and microphone on in order to genuinely interact with the students
- use of chat by other classmates encouraged
- the weekly questions are sent out in advance to give students time to prepare.

Examples of the personal questions include:

- what is a favourite object in the space you are in and why?
- what are you having for dinner tonight?
- what is a skill you have developed in isolation?

Wellbeing questions focused on things such as:

- what is one thing that went well this week and one thing that was a challenge?
- what is the biggest challenge for you in the virtual classroom environment?
- what is one positive thing that COVID-19 has changed in your life?

Questions designed to elicit responses about interests included:

- what book are you reading at the moment?
- what has been the most affecting thing you have consumed on social media this week?

The benefits for all participants in responding to these questions were multifaceted. Discovering each other's similarities and differences helped build connections and empathy. Staff were encouraged to adapt the questions pertaining to interests to their disciplinary contexts (for example in the media production classes we asked students what films or television shows they were watching, and journalism students were asked what news sources they were engaging with). These sessions often took well over half the scheduled class time but were filled with humour and rapport. It also created a safe and constructive space where staff and students could help respond in real-time to things that were challenging them and brainstorm solutions together.

As mentioned above, very few of these ideas are particularly unique or new to the online teaching environment. For years learning and teaching scholars have been advocating the idea

of the flipped classroom whereby social interactions and community building are explicitly privileged when teaching face-to-face with students incentivised and encouraged to engage with content prior or after 'class' in order to cover content. However, we note with interest that the conditions set through the whole of institution commitment to belonging gave staff the confidence and language to privilege community building and social connections in unprecedented ways and in many ways super charging the powerful ethos of belonging.

Conclusion

The Belonging Project and the RMIT Belonging Strategy were conceived as attempts to proactively pre-empt the reactionary policy-making that runs rife within the Australian higher education sector. Experience tells us that each year there will be a new crisis in need of a response, either as a result of changing government policy, shifts in individual university management positions – or in this case, a global pandemic. An institutional approach to belonging is a preventive measure and a holistic narrative of inclusion can circumvent student engagement and retention issues before they arise. We argue that by explicitly placing the conversation about educational values, community and belonging back at the centre of the student (and staff) experience, schools and programs are in a much better position to address the relentless call to respond to each new issue and in doing so save considerable amounts of time and wasted energy. We also argue that values underpinning belonging go some way to counteract the neo-liberal management systems that are so prevalent across the sector.

As this paper demonstrates, the strategies in place to address staff and student belonging in our school during the pandemic were far from ground-breaking. Rather, like the Belonging Project itself, they were grassroots, accessible and inclusive. We aimed meet staff and students where they were, with just-in-time interventions only when needed – particularly given the level of exhaustion across both groups. In informal and formal teaching and learning support sessions we sought to highlight staff and student capacities by facilitating sharing, community, and challenges. In the online teaching environment necessitated by lockdown, belonging became the key intangible asset of the student experience and the central aim of good teaching. As Allen et al. (2020) argue, belonging is “facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences involving the social milieu, which dynamically interact with the individual’s character, experiences, culture, identity, and perceptions” (p. 2). In this mix of factors, we could only impact the student experience in our (virtual) classrooms, so had to keep our interventions directed at this micro-level.

Our location within a School of Media and Communication had us ideally positioned to respond to these challenges, emerging as they did from a supercomplex world (in the throes of a global pandemic) and university environment (under increasing economic pressure even before the pandemic hit). We are practiced at encountering such wicked problems and were able to extend our disciplinary model to encompass Barnett’s argument about the ontological possibilities of good teaching. Given the political grounding of our project, its response to a changing HE industry and the needs of more diverse student cohorts, this sort of pedagogy – what Barnett (2012) calls “open ontologies for an unknown world” (p. 72) – becomes a matter of equity and inclusion as much as a requirement for meeting the targets of a “businesslike” (Thrift, 2016) institution. According to Campbell (2021), it will take years for the effects of the pandemic – on school attendance and results, as well as on universities and the student experience – to be fully felt, and the emergency measures in place may become permanent. Because the “disadvantages that COVID-19 has highlighted are deep-rooted” (Campbell 2021, p. 8) belonging as a university-wide strategy, embedded within a disciplinary program, and crafted into best-practice teaching for a supercomplex world, will remain vital.

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Conflict of interest and ethics statement

The authors report no conflict of interest. All research reported here is covered by the organisation's ethical protocols.

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