

## Belonging in education: Lessons from the Belonging Project

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### Abstract

*This paper presents some preliminary findings from The Belonging Project—a longitudinal learning and teaching research project seeking to develop and define a new approach to student engagement. In this project, the concept of belonging is used as a tactic to engage both staff and students in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University as part of the project's aim to improve the student experience. This paper maps the way in which we use belonging—defined in relation to the educational experience—as a point of departure to achieve this outcome. Having established our definition of belonging and its purpose in our project, we then discuss some key results of focus groups with students, outlining the way in which students navigate issues of transition, interdisciplinarity, and notions of space and place, in their relationship to university and campus life.*

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## Introduction

The Belonging Project is a learning and teaching project aimed at improving student engagement in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. The project employs the concept of “belonging” as a way to articulate a renewed focus on the student experience within the Australian tertiary sector, brought about by a range of political, economic and social changes and pressures. As Australia, along with many other developed nations, continues to affirm its belief in the value of building a “knowledge” or “innovation” economy (Australian Government, 2009), the necessity of training a broad base of future knowledge workers becomes a practical reality. Responding to this challenge, universities find themselves welcoming larger and more diverse cohorts in order to meet this demand.

Set against these wide-ranging social changes, we have adopted the concept of belonging as a rhetorical device to draw together and narrativise the range of practical strategies we are developing to improve the student experience in our school. The concept of belonging has proved particularly meaningful given our desire to ensure a grassroots approach to change. Ours is a recently formed school, the result of a 2009 merger between the former Schools of Applied Communication and Creative Media to form The School of Media and Communication, the largest at RMIT University.<sup>1</sup> It was not solely a

structural merger, but also represented the integration of distinct disciplinary identities and associated pedagogies. Many staff members were required to change processes that had over many years become accepted as the normal or only way of doing things. It was a challenging time for many. This process of change, combined with a raft of new strategic directives from the university level, has left staff cynical of change that is seemingly driven and enforced from “above.” In this environment, it was necessary to adopt an inclusive and grassroots philosophy in our work with staff. Through this process, belonging became a resonant concept for the staff as well as the students of this large new school.

In this paper we outline the way in which our project has worked from belonging as a theoretical concept and idealised psychosocial state, to a range of transferrable curricular and extra-curricular initiatives to achieve its application in practice. In this way, our project demonstrates the currency and value of the concept of belonging in the area of education, and in the development of student engagement strategies within the discipline of media and communication. Before mapping some of these strategies, we first outline the broader social context that the project emerges from, the propositions of the emergent Belonging Narrative Model that we have developed, and discuss the processes we undertook to test this model in focus groups with undergraduate students in our school. We will discuss themes emerging from the focus groups and through this range of concerns, we demonstrate the conceptual potential of belonging to address the range of challenges facing the contemporary university.

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<sup>1</sup> There are currently 12 undergraduate programs in the School of Media and Communication, representing a diverse array of disciplinary approaches: Media, Journalism, Public Relations, Professional Communication, Advertising, Creative Writing, Photography, Games, Animation & Interactive Media, Music Industries, Communication Design, and Multimedia Systems.

## Belonging in the educational context

The Belonging Project aims to develop a model for an improved cohort experience aligned to the three-year undergraduate degree structure. Its guiding principles are designed to be transferrable to other contexts and institutions in the higher education sector. Specifically, our project aims to develop a range of strategies that are inclusive of all students, including those from international and low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds. These more diverse cohorts are a by-product of the Australian government's stated focus on attracting and retaining students from a range of backgrounds who have not traditionally undertaken higher education, most clearly articulated in the Bradley Review's targets (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). These include, for instance, a national target of at least 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or higher by 2020, and a national target of 20% of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level from LSES backgrounds by 2020 (p. xiv).

But these targets, and the more diverse cohorts they will attract to universities, bring with them new challenges. Devlin (2010) argues that it would be a "moral and economic tragedy" (para 22) for universities to attract more LSES students without providing the necessary support for them to succeed. For all students, the transition to university can be fraught, but even more so for students from LSES or international backgrounds. Research has found that for these students, "engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are students for whom the culture of the institution is foreign and at times

alienating and uninviting" (Krause, 2005, p. 9). Further, students from LSES backgrounds "have less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education" and have been found to "experience alienation from the cultures of universities" (James et al., 2008, p. 3). For students like these, a sense of belonging can be vital in ensuring they persist and succeed at university (James, 2001).

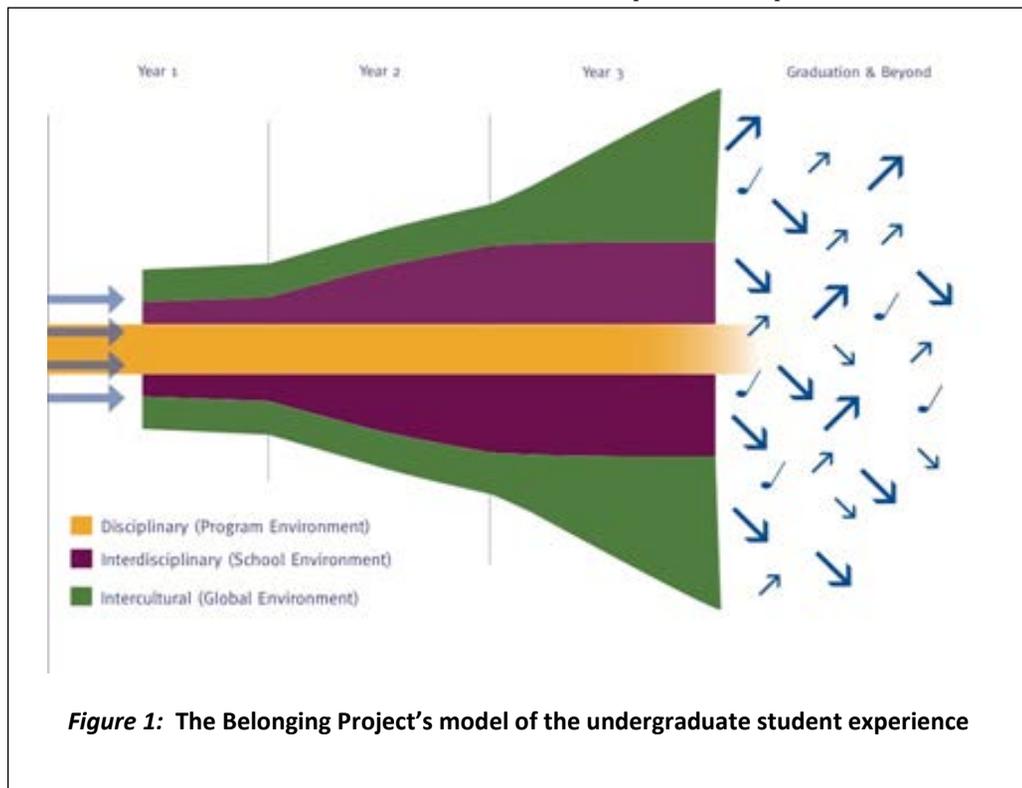
As Baumeister and Leary (1995) outline, the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation and takes precedence over self-esteem and self-actualisation. The authors argue that individuals working alone face a "severe competitive disadvantage" compared to those working as part of a group (p. 499). When applied to the higher education sector it could be said that it is socially and professionally threatening not to belong, particularly within the post-university context. While belonging has clear implications for the social experience of students, it also plays a crucial role academically. For instance, Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that belonging is a powerful influence on human thinking and "both actual and potential bonds exert substantial effects on how people think" (p. 505), while Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss (2002) outline the positive relationship between social connectedness and cognitive performance. Walton, Cohen, Cwir and Spencer (2011) argue that "the mere sense of social connectedness" enhances students' motivation to achieve, as they respond to and quickly adopt the goals of others as their own within a group environment (p. 529). Citing Aronson, the writers also note that, "research on cooperative learning finds that structuring school assignments so that it is in students' interest to cooperate rather than compete can increase cooperation and improve school outcomes" (p. 515).

## The “Belonging Model” of student engagement

Having established the relationship between belonging, personal development and academic success, we used it as the basis for developing a narrative model for the undergraduate student experience. The model is designed to narrativise the range of academic and social transitions and events that make up the student experience. We have employed a narrative methodology, recognising that “stories are powerful tools in learning, because they are one of the most fundamental ways to order experiences and events” (Abma, 2000, p. 226). The Belonging Narrative Model develops across three tiers, connected to the existing three-year structures of the undergraduate

experience, as well as the disciplinary and/or professional foci of courses particular to our school. In the Belonging Narrative Model (Figure 1), each student’s sense of identity and belonging is built incrementally across the three years of their undergraduate degree program, beginning with a strong grounding in a *diverse disciplinary cohort* (tier one), broadening out to encompass the *interdisciplinary community of the school* (tier two), and grounded in a sense of belonging as an *ethical global citizen* (tier three).

The Belonging Narrative Model positions students not as passive consumers but rather as co-creators of their university experience, recognising the way in which universities are being reimagined as service providers, spaces where value is



co-created by consumers within complex frameworks of actors and resources (Karpen, Hall, Katsoulidis, and Cam, 2011). As the diagram suggests, the three tiers of the model are not rigidly successive, each locked to a particular year. Rather, elements of all tiers are present across the three year undergraduate student experience, but with a shifting emphasis. The timing of this emphasis is designed according to our disciplinary environment, but could be easily reordered in different contexts. Indeed, the model is designed with the particularities of our institutional context in mind; we work within the School of Media and Communication where students take the bulk of their courses in their professional field or discipline, along with a number of common core courses and contextual majors. However, it is also intended to be flexible; we are not aiming to prescribe specific structures or forms of belonging, but rather demonstrating a way that works in our environment, that can be reimagined and reinterpreted in different institutional and disciplinary settings.

### Testing the model: Student focus groups

Before we were able to pilot our first iteration of the model, it was necessary to test its propositions; first through a number of collaborative workshops with academic and professional staff, and then through a series of focus groups with students. For these focus groups, we approached students from all year levels and all programs in our school both in person at Student Staff Consultative Committee meetings and in core lectures, as well as via email. Out of 148 initial respondents, 75 students participated in a focus group. We ran 16 focus groups in total, with an average of 4 to 6 students in each group. Students were assigned groups

according to year level, with separate cross-year groups for international students to provide them with a comfortable environment to encourage their contribution.

We began student focus groups with an icebreaker and focusing activity, drawing on Loi (2007) and Akama's (2007) work on "playful triggers"—non-verbal artifacts used to facilitate discussion and interaction among people from diverse backgrounds. Students were first asked to use paper and coloured markers to "map" their student experience on worksheets. They referred back to these worksheets throughout the session, using them as prompts for discussion, adding to them as the sessions continued, and using them as a place to develop their thinking in response to the range of questions asked. Following their reflections on the worksheets, participants were asked to reflect further on key points in their university journey—from their pre-university expectations, their transition to first year, through to their thoughts upon completing their degree and embarking on their professional lives.

From the focus groups, we gained insights into a range of concerns facing students at key points of their transition before, during and after their undergraduate experience. The key themes that emerged were: expectations about university and RMIT; orientation needs and expectations; social expectations and issues; academic expectations and issues; industry and professional identity; cross-year connections; interdisciplinary connections; student spaces and resources; student communication; internationalisation and global links; and alumni perceptions. In the discussion that follows, we focus on four areas that presented themselves as both challenges and opportunities for improving the student experience in our School:

challenges of transition and the first year experience, interdisciplinary connections, informal spaces and how students can be at home in the world.

## Challenges of transition and the first year experience

The majority of the students who participated in focus groups were first years, and they confirmed what existing literature on the first year experience (FYE) has found (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012; Kift, 2008; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010)—that transition into first year is the most challenging for students and the most crucial for universities to improve student retention and success. Our focus groups confirmed that the transition to university represents both an academic *and* social shift for students “on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners” (Kift et al., p. 3). We found that our students, often much to their surprise, require the assistance of teaching staff to make social connections with their cohort peers. Given the professional orientation of the programs in our School, many students reported beginning university with a highly instrumental approach to their study. However, a number of these students reported later realising how central to success social connections could be. As one student reflected: *I just wanted to come here and get it done, to be honest. I didn't realise how much I actually cared about having friends until I was here and I didn't have any.*

Another challenging transition was the introduction to a new academic environment, particularly around key academic literacies that are often rendered invisible as “common sense” to teaching staff. Students in programs that required

the acquisition of technical skills (alongside conceptual development) expressed particular anxiety about differences in proficiency among the cohort: *I came to this course and was just so intimidated by the technical skill of everyone, I was like, how am I supposed to catch up? ...I think it creates a lot of unhappiness actually.* While most senior students had resolved this anxiety – as one third-year student recounted, *I later learnt that uni is not about technical training, it's about learning to think in a certain way* – the evidence suggests that nonetheless there is a need for further work around this issue at key points of transition.

To remedy this, we piloted two initiatives: the first, introducing a more coordinated, school-wide approach to orientation; and the second, trialling and evaluating an off-campus “Cohort Day Out” in two programs, Photography and Creative Writing. Qualitative interviews held during O Week suggest that our efforts to introduce a new approach to orientation were largely successful. Students reported that they found their teachers welcoming, and enjoyed making new friends with common interests. As one student remarked: *I got to meet a lot of people who were interested in the same thing I was.* Another student told us that getting the time to meet their cohort before classes began was a valuable transition experience, given that they will be spending a lot of time with them over the coming three years. The Cohort Days Out were also successful in developing stronger connections among program cohorts. Our research suggests that these sorts of activities can be simple and low-cost, yet significantly improve students' sense of belonging to their program and assist to develop key academic literacies, especially when part of a larger suite of well-timed formal and informal cohort

building activities throughout their first year.

## Interdisciplinary connections

The Belonging Narrative Model's second tier emphasises connections between and across disciplines, making the most of the existing interdisciplinary learning environment of our School. We asked students in our focus groups about their awareness of this broader community, and about their place within it. Most students expressed a desire to develop a broader sense of belonging not just to their program peers, but also to the interdisciplinary community of the school. Many were keen to meet students in other disciplines, who they considered their "future co-workers." As one student lamented: *We don't get enough opportunities to meet other people [who] could help us in our jobs later on in life.* Students demonstrated that from an early stage of their undergraduate studies they were anticipating the flexible workplace and "portfolio career" that typifies professional life in the creative industries, in which a range of diverse roles and positions replaces the life-long job of old (Hartley, 2005). In this sort of professional landscape, flexibility is essential, and interdisciplinary learning, thinking and collaboration is what will equip students with the necessary skills to respond nimbly: "In the knowledge economy...the right knowledge to solve a problem is in a different place to the problem itself, so interdisciplinary innovation is an essential tool for the future" (Blackwell, Wilson, Street, Boulton, & Knell, 2009, p. 3).

However, our participants indicated that this needs to be achieved in a way that balances students' need to belong to a localised cohort before they are able to extend themselves to interact productively

on an interdisciplinary level. It should also be noted that not all programs and industries represented in our School reflect trends towards interdisciplinarity; in a number of fields specialisation is the trend, and so interdisciplinary activities need to be tailored to disciplinary contexts. Hence the inherent flexibility of our proposed model—different tiers of the narrative can be emphasised at different stages of the student experience, according to the demands of the discipline and program.

## Informal spaces

One of the Belonging Project's pilot initiatives involved seeking out and redesigning an underutilised on-campus space (i) to foster an interdisciplinary environment where students could mix with peers from other programs and disciplines within the school; and (ii) to facilitate a range of student activities, including quiet study, group work and social activities. In response to feedback from the student focus groups, we refurbished a student common area—called the Student Atelier—converting it as one student put it, from an "empty white cube" into a busy hub of student activity. A key to the initiative's success was our decision to employ an Interior Design graduate and three Communication Design students as co-creators of the refurbishment design. As Lomas and Oblinger (2006) argue, "spaces that catalyze social interaction, serendipitous meetings, and impromptu conversations contribute to personal and professional growth" (p. 5.6<sup>2</sup>). The refurbished Atelier has seen a significant increase in student use, and widespread praise from students. In interviews following the refurbishment, students reflected on their use of the space, saying that it fills a gap between the

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 5, page 6.

formality of the library and the informality of public space: *Having a space that's not the library, that we can come to and be as loud as we like and do our group work is really important.* The co-creation process of the refurbishment was also successful, with one student reporting that *coming in here is quite communal, it feels like it's the students', like we own this place.*

However, Lomas and Oblinger (2006) argue that "the students' world is not just the physical one in which they find themselves; it is also the virtual one in which they chat with friends, meet people, share photographs, and explore new ideas" (p. 5.9). Students in our focus groups described Facebook as *the new study group*. Students reported adopting Facebook features to suit their range of needs, from creating private groups to facilitate group work, using chat to check-in with their peers off-campus, using the Facebook wall as a message board and, in the visual disciplines, tagging peers in uploaded images to invite feedback on works-in-progress. For one participant, Facebook was the non-threatening way of approaching a stranger in the hallway: *The Facebook group really helped because I got to uni and I was really lost and I didn't feel comfortable going up to these people who were essentially strangers to me...doing it online I felt like less of an idiot.* However, the online space can be isolating and risky for students without the necessary cultural capital and resources to interact appropriately online, and a number of our focus groups indicated that more work is required across the university to ensure that students fully grasp the professional and social implications of their use of Facebook from an early stage.

## At home in the world

While many students demonstrated that they were already thinking internationally, positioning themselves as future global professionals, this was not necessarily something that they considered as part of their student experience. While a minority took advantage of existing exchange or study abroad opportunities, for most, these were not worth the bureaucratic hard work, and the University's "global passport"<sup>3</sup>, was consigned to something they would do after their studies, as part of their future professional lives (a number cited Asia or the US as places they saw themselves working in future).

However, many students reported a persistent divide in the classroom between domestic and international cohorts. This reminds us that space is not just about interaction but also about belonging. Media ethnographer David Morley (2001) argues that home is not simply a physical space but also a place where one can be *rhetorically* at home, confident of being understood, of sharing the same discursive space (p. 425). For many, being at home and belonging is also about the exclusion of difference, so that those who belong do so at the exclusion of others from their notion of community. For international or LSES students, the university classroom can feel like a zone of exclusion, highlighting differences rather than similarities between students. However, it is worth noting that many international students possess a form of global cultural capital that domestic students may lack. The international students who participated in

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<sup>3</sup> A key plank of RMIT's (2011) *Strategic Plan 2015* is the "global passport," with an aim to "define and deliver an RMIT student experience that is characterised by its global engagement, international mobility and cross cultural opportunities" (p. 9).

our focus groups had already positioned themselves as thoroughly “global” citizens, and were planning their next international experience – for postgraduate study or for work.

## Conclusion

Initial testing of the Belonging Narrative Model through focus groups provided evidence to underscore its logic: that students require a sense of belonging that is initially localised—professional, disciplinary, or program-based. However, they also crave a cumulative sense of belonging across and beyond disciplinary boundaries and within the dynamic environment of the School and University. In order to build capacity within cohorts, our first stage of pilot activities focussed on this group of students, as we introduced Coordinated Orientation Week activities across the School for the first time, trialled cohort building activities at the program level in two programs, and introduced a refurbished student space for School cohorts to use for work and socialising. While the details of these pilot initiatives will form the basis of future publications, our qualitative data to date supports an approach that emphasises a sense of belonging—to a program, school, and university—for all students.

A key realisation from the first phase of research was that fostering a sense of belonging for staff is essential if it is also to become a part of the student experience. While we had initially imagined that students would be central in our research efforts, it soon became clear that a great deal of work was necessary to harness the tacit knowledge of staff to best understand the student experience in our School. This is an approach that is supported by the work of Devlin et al. (2012), whose project on teaching and support of LSES students

included a guide for teachers as a key output. In making the student experience central, it is necessary to first interrogate and understand the staff experience, which will become a key part of our ongoing project in the succeeding phases. As we work towards further testing and developing our model, we will continue in our approach that is grassroots, inclusive of all staff and students, and uses the power of narrative to draw together the diverse interactions that comprise the student experience.

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