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Pedagogies of belonging in an anxious world: A collaborative autoethnography of four practitioners

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Abstract

The concept of belonging has found prominence in higher education learning environments, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an unprecedented impact on educational provision. In times of disruption, alienation and isolation, the most basic of our psychological and physiological needs have come to be almost universally recognised as critical factors that must be considered and examined. Experiencing belonging is integral to human existence, and knowing where, with whom, and how we belong, is a salient driver for learning and self-actualisation. We recognise there are a number of ways to frame and approach the idea of belonging in the educational experience. We also recognise that there are multiple understandings of what belonging means and therefore how it is enacted within the curricula and the "classroom" in its varying forms - physical, online, digital, work-based. This Editorial takes a critical perspective to our own intellectual standpoint in relation to pedagogies of belonging. As co-editors, we have outlined our respective conceptions and experiences of belonging as a collaborative autoethnography, capturing our individual views of pedagogies of belonging in a collaborative context. Our collaboration has allowed us to situate ourselves both theoretically and practically, as well as ontologically, and advance our understanding of practices that promote student belonging in all its possible forms within the higher education experience. We suggest that the possibilities for belonging offered by interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches are ripe for inquiry, and the place of non-traditional, Indigenous, iterative and emergent methodologies to examine belonging requires further exploration.

Practitioner Notes

1. Belonging is a complex, multi-dimensional space that must take into account the ontological, epistemological, spatial, material, social, cultural and affective dimensions of the human experience.
2. Writing in the spirit of a collaborative autoethnography, we aim to hold space for the multiplicity of interpretations that surround the concept of belonging.
3. Pedagogies of belonging are not universal but unique to people, place, modes of study, and disciplinary and transdisciplinary cultures, among many other factors.
4. Interrogating and critiquing received ways of making sense of belonging is a productive space for educational institutions.
5. The problem with belonging is not merely an institutional problem, but a societal one, and we have a great deal to learn from Indigenous Knowledges and perspectives.

Keywords

Belonging, pedagogies, COVID-19, collaborative autoethnography, higher education, Indigenous, un-belonging

Welcome to this Special Issue on pedagogies of belonging in an anxious world. We would like to open this Special Issue by acknowledging the Dharawal, Gadigal, Turrbal and Yugara people as the Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands that we, the Editorial Team, have lived and worked to produce this Special Issue. We acknowledge them as the Knowledge Holders of the unique history, culture, and ecology, the lands and waterways, and the stories and songlines of these regions, and we pay our respect to their Elders, past and present.

As we enter our third year of learning to live with COVID-19, we are pleased to bring this issue to you and we were grateful to receive such a large number of submissions. The incredible response we received to our call for papers indicates that we are not the only ones thinking about belonging, particularly in the (not quite) post-pandemic environment. As we expected, the variety and range of submissions we received indicated that understanding and enacting pedagogies of belonging is a complex, multi-dimensional space that must take into account the ontological, epistemological, spatial, material, social, cultural and affective dimensions of the human experience. Conveying one true universal approach to belonging would be an exclusive rather than an inclusive act, and yet we are compelled to provide some boundaries, some guidelines, and in the case of this issue, some cases that inspire others to think about it in their own contexts.

In this Editorial, as co-editors, we maintain a commitment to plurality by writing in the spirit of collaborative autoethnography to express our respective views of pedagogies of belonging at this moment in time. We each give our perspective or standpoint on belonging, expressing an ontological positioning (Vikki), asking both what is in this issue and what needs to be (Nona), and also considering what is absent but requires close attention (Martin and Alisa). Our work combines, then, our individual 'spins' with a collaborative approach. As described in the paper in this issue by **Mueller, Andrew and Conner**, "collaborative enquiry is a multi-vocal approach". Our intention has been to further stimulate contemporary discourse about the pedagogy of belonging and to elicit a much-needed discussion, scrutiny, and clarification. Our collaboration traverses the need to critically unsettle settled notions, rethinking dichotomies of online versus face-to-face, and refashioning what it means to 'belong' to curricula and higher education cultures and communities. We extend our discussion here to critical aspects of belonging missing from the array of papers, incorporating discussion of our socio-political post-COVID-19 era Zeitgeist and thoughtful consideration of the pedagogical affordances of Indigenous ways of belonging.

Vikki's position: A critically ontological lens onto 'belonging'

In this Special Issue on pedagogies of belonging, we invited authors to engage with the ways we design learning experiences and curricula that enable students to thrive in a supercomplex, uncertain and increasingly anxious world (Barnett, 2015). We asked them to consider a deep engagement with what it means to belong – to our communities, to each other, to our professions, to our studies and institutions, and most importantly, to our own becoming – and to attend to what this means for our role as educators in the higher education environment. Belonging is never a given; it is something at which we work and in this Issue contributors are working on both the notion and the experience. We are putting to the test the very notion of belonging. We are critically examining 'belonging' and 'un-belonging' and developing a more nuanced understanding of belonging in the higher education context.

Belonging, like all concepts, has a history and a received understanding. It is neither natural nor immutable; "every sentiment, particularly the noblest and most disinterested, has a history" (Foucault, 1977, p. 153). For Foucault, the aim of historical research is to reveal the history of sentiments. In this way, history becomes localised and individuals can participate in the historical investigation of their own beliefs. This put history and philosophy "to the service of life" (Marshall,

2001, p. 107). This issue does this to the notion of 'belonging'. In so doing, we are undertaking what Foucault (1984, p. 50) calls a critical ontology.

> *The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly as a theory, a doctrine, nor even a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them* (Foucault, 1984, p. 50).

Belonging then, in this Special Issue, is tested, re-invoked, re-discovered, re-imagined and most importantly, put to work in the service of life.

Nona's observations: Belonging, pedagogies, and un-belonging

An interesting observation concerning this Special Issue is that it, and many of the papers in this volume, were conceived and shaped concurrently as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Thus, the volume reflects this profoundly disruptive moment in our history. Millions of enrolled learners and teaching teams who, up until this point, had attended campus exclusively were directly affected by the pedagogical changes caused by the pandemic. It has become evident that this unprecedented impact of the pandemic has shocked and destabilised higher education (Crawford et al., 2020), and its already fragile academic and business models (Coates, 2020). As I write this Editorial, the coronavirus pandemic continues to affect and alter our lives, societies, and economies around the world and the higher education sector is not immune. In my field of practice, curriculum and pedagogy in higher education, the impact of the pandemic continues to challenge educational provision, with students and teaching staff confronted to navigate the 'new normal'.

The human need to belong in educational contexts is challenged by this anxious and uncertain state of affairs. From my perspective, a deeper understanding of the idea of belonging achieved through a critical ontology has the potential to drive forward informed practices within learning, teaching and assessment, and in shaping who the students can become (Tice et al., 2021). I am conscious of a fundamental question which alludes to the role of the campus and, in particular, how students might traverse and relate to the university, their course and their discipline. From this standpoint, it is important to seek a greater understanding of students' experiences and diversity in an effort to refrain from standardising assumptions of belonging.

On reflection, universities responded to the disruptions brought by COVID-19 by managing the delivery of their programs through increased reliance on online and digital technologies to facilitate learning and teaching, student support, staff engagement, and manage university affairs in general (Crawford et al., 2020). As a result, universities shifted educational provision online on a scale never seen before. New forms of pedagogy and approaches to assessment were adopted along with adapting practices to address new administrative requirements. The move of learning spaces from classrooms into technology-enhanced learning environments provided both opportunities and challenges of pedagogical importance. Key was the promotion of pedagogies that encourage active learning and engagement online as part of instilling a sense of belonging in learning communities. It is highly desirable that any online learning program nurtures a pedagogy of belonging based on social dimensions in which the relationship between learners and teachers promotes and consolidates learning experiences. At a time when anxiety and uncertainty continue to present themselves throughout the many waves of the pandemic, a sense of belonging is fundamental to the types of pedagogies that facilitate students' online learning engagement, diligence and success (Galloway, 2020).

This Special Issue speaks to the pedagogies of belonging in an anxious world. It is important to note, however, that the term pedagogy is often misunderstood. For this Issue, pedagogy is considered as encompassing "attention to the person and subjectivity, and the world and culture, and even policy and institutions, but it seems to put the emphasis particularly on the interpersonal instructional (or facilitative) act" (Yates, 2009, p. 20). Such an act involves all encounters and dealings of the teacher with students concerning the students' development, growth and wellbeing. The enactment of pedagogy, then, is focused on the relationship and interaction between the teacher and the student (Ponte & Ax, 2008; Press, 2017). From this perspective, an integral part of the notion of pedagogy is the relational, emotional, moral, and personal dimensions of the educative process (van Manen, 2002). These dimensions are integral to pedagogy of belonging and are central to being and becoming that shape agentic capabilities and nurture who the students are and who they can become (Tice et al., 2021). Put simply, the need for belonging is a fundamental human right and, belongingness, Maslow (1962) maintains, will take precedence over esteem and self-actualisation. The need to belong may be considered as more essential and more important than the requirement for knowledge and understanding. Conceiving the design of curricula and pedagogies and situating the learning experience with this in mind has the potential to establish connections amongst students in a safe, respectful and supportive learning environment.

A pedagogy of belonging highlights the significance of the teacher-student relationship that actively involves all students in learning and teaching, whether it be in a class situation and/or interactions occurring in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (Padro, 2022; Press & Padro, 2022; Winstone et al., 2020). Connections, interactions and relational endeavours associated with academic achievement and a prosperous life at university are crucial to a sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Life at university and belongingness embody the physically situated nature of learning (Fawns, 2019), encapsulating being online or offline. However, given that the increasing digital presence in society and its affordances are now fundamental in our everyday life (Press et al., 2019), learning can never be just fully face-to-face or just fully online. This understanding of pedagogy allows for a re-understanding of the dichotomy of 'face-to-face' and 'asynchronous' modes of education.

The literature (e.g., Carvalho & Yeoman, 2018; Gourlay et al., 2021: Ryberg et al., 2018) highlights that learning involves complex entanglements of students, teachers, ideas, tasks, activities, tools, artefacts, places, and spaces. The complexity also alludes to the entangled dynamics of how students relate to their environment and other influences affecting their learning (Kek et al., 2022). Indeed, if we were to consider the nature of learning as social and interdependent – and therefore situated (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015) – it is fair to assert that belongingness is mediated for and by students in a complex social-material-digital world, and the places and spaces for learning they navigate affect how they learn (Gourlay et al., 2021). Thus, belonging is also about access and space "depicted as a rich and fluid constellation of interactions, a simultaneity of many stories, a multiplicity of experiences" (Gravett & Ajawwi, 2021, p. 2).

Experiencing belonging in reconfigured learning spaces conjures anytime, anywhere engagement in learning. With the move to fully online due to pandemic-related restrictions, the taken for granted spaces and places of belonging on campus have been shifted. As students study remotely, their sense of belonging, or indeed un-belonging might co-exist relating to matters of participation, diversity and inclusion.

> *Of course, studying remotely can be a positive experience, for some students it might reduce travel time, alleviate social anxiety, prompting a levelling of the interactional playing field in some ways. For those who are used to studying online, this shift might prompt more interaction and foster camaraderie with students who previously may have been studying primarily face to face through a sense of shared experiences. At the same*

> *time, the labour of home schooling and caring for others might detract/distract from the experience of belonging and participation in higher education. These multiple experiences of belonging and un-belonging might exist for students at the same time* (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021, p. 7)

The experiences of un-belonging shape life in the university for students as being isolated as well as lacking a sense of togetherness and accomplishment. Feeling out of place undermines the desire to continue and persist because it undermines social cohesion that ties students to their institutions and peers (Hurtado, 2007; Tinto, 2017). Certain teaching practices can unintentionally lead students to feelings of un-belonging, for example when it comes to cultural diversity concerns. Recognising how students are situated in states of un-belonging through curricular discourse has implications for understanding students' needs in these anxious and changing times (Barnett, 2015). In contrast, perceptions of acceptance and connection represent a sense of belonging for many students and this is "associated with student wellbeing, academic attainment and retention" (Winstone et al., 2020, p. 2). Building students' capacity to develop a sense of belonging has become a common focus in university practice and research but it is challenging to say the least. Teaching teams are increasingly challenged and concerned about questions relating to how to encourage and engage their students online, how to promote peer-to-peer connections, how to enable and foster a sense of community, and ultimately how to cultivate a sense of belonging within online and blended learning spaces, within disciplinary contexts, within the university and beyond. This affirms a need for close re-examination of student learning and student belongingness in higher education.

Martin's perspective: Moving past the neoliberal into the Indigenous

This Special Issue demonstrates how the anxiety-ridden COVID-19 pandemic galvanised the human need to belong, putting pedagogies of belonging once more under the higher educationalist's microscope. The human nature of the need is shown in the references to Maslow throughout the texts in this Special Issue. Following on from such studies as Dianati et al. (2017) on leveraging technology to match the desire, or need, for flipped learning, the papers have at their heart the fact that humans need to be part of something meaningful. The pandemic also foregrounded two narratives missing from our selection of studies: the loss of community as a concept under a predominantly neoliberalist ontology within higher education since the mid-'80s lead; and the value, even necessity, of (re)turning to Indigenous ways of knowing to (re)ground ourselves in this world of anxiety.

The anxiety of which we speak is not merely born of a COVID-19-era Zeitgeist nor, in the educationalist's world, on the need to educate for unknown and uncertain futures (Barnett, 2004) and job markets with transferable skills and critical capabilities that optimise employability (Valencia-Forrester, 2019). In *Community: The structure of belonging,* Block (2008) had described the challenge of the Zeitgeist: "The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole" (p. 1). The need to belong, he maintained, derives from the isolation that has come to characterise our silo-separated lives, institutions, and communities due to the dominance of "our individualistic narrative" (p. 2). Put crudely, the master narrative of the liberated individual who might rise from being a grocer's child to a prime minister like Margaret Thatcher has proven one factor normalising isolationist, self-interested individualism at the expense of more collectivist, community-oriented ways of being in the world. We created an academe where "competitive self-interested individuals vie for their own material and ideological gain" (Giroux, 2002, p. 429). Pedagogically, what was at risk was our capacity to experience connectedness within learning communities and the transformative potential of both collaborative and Indigenous ways of learning.

The pandemic necessitated the isolation of silo as denoted by an individual's Zoom tile, with the Zoom room representing a mosaic of tiles, symbolically depicting the coming together of multiple isolated individuals. This is the image that spurred many of the investigations into pedagogies of belonging within this volume. As **Muller et al.** argue in this Issue, we were given the chance to create or recreate what Foster (1996) had called an immutable "we-feeling" (p. 25) by leveraging, as Garrison (2016) demonstrated, the human need to belong for teaching and learning purposes. What we leveraged online were the affordances of community, described by Rovai (2002) as mutual interdependence, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals and overlapping life histories (p. 4). The factors listed are coterminous with those identified by Tu and Corry in 2002 as features of e-communities. These are also key themes that permeate studies in this special issue; themes enabling the trajectory of the individual to co-exist with learning in community (Andrew, 2014). Pedagogical acts of becoming (Barnett, 2019) can coexist with the mutual enterprise of belonging, a key feature of Wenger's (1998) communities of practice.

It may seem that pandemic-era online pedagogies merely reanimated theories we had long known despite the neoliberal master narrative's attempt to overthrow them. Belonging, however, has long lain in the lifeblood of Indigenous and First Nations ways of being and becoming (Rameka, 2018). While a survey of belonging in First Nation ontologies is beyond the scope of this Editorial, there is space to discuss, in the footsteps of Rameka (2018), the roles of being and belonging in the worldview of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Central to this interconnection of being and belonging are the concepts of *whakapapa* (genealogical connections) and *whanaungatanga* (family relationships), concepts which inform the transformation of Māori education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Engaging with prestige- or mana-enhancing pedagogies congruent with Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview) involves leveraging the power of the *whakapapa kōrero,* the narrative of one's connection to one's forebears, and, through them, to the universe. To tell the story of who we are today in the stead of those before us is both grounding and demonstrative of to whom and where we belong (Te Huia, 2015). The narrative returns us to our *Tūrangawaewae,* our place to stand, our place of belonging where we feel that immutable we-feeling, and to the whenua, the placenta, the land, the environment. Here flow the *wairua*, the two waters of spirit and body. A method of telling linking the human to the ecological is the *pūrākau*, creating identities through storying (Lee, 2009), mapping stories of place onto individuals' cartographies of belonging. *Whakapapa*, Rameka (2018) provide a continuum of life from the spiritual world to the physical world as well as a link to others past, present and future.

The family, the *whānau,* Rameka (2018) tells us, is at the heart and hearth of individual and collective belonging, and *Whanaungatanga*, kinship, is a method through which Māori view, maintain and strengthen connections to both family and community. The respectful sharing of experience consolidates collaboration, cooperation, cohesion and community. It fosters belongingness. Two modes of expression crucial to Whanaungatanga are the *karakia*, the prayers that make sacred the start and ending of every *kōrero,* including any learning and teaching event, and the *kōrero* of the *kaikorero.* He — for traditionally the narrator was a man — is the speaker. On the *marae*, the community meeting house, his words both narrate our connectedness to the land and each other and open out the procedures of the *pōwhiri* or welcoming ceremony. This protocol removes *tapu* (restrictions) to bring strangers or visitors *(manuhiri)* into alignment with the hosts, the *tangata whenua*, the people of the land. It is a symbolic sharing of belonging. The centralising of *Whānau Tangata* (family and community) and *Ngā Hononga* (relationships) is a feature of a worldview where belongingness serves to define and unite us (Rameka, 2018).

The protocols of the marae suggest the affordances of decolonising research in *kaupapa Māori,* principles underpinning Māori research (Smith, 2013). Such research is conducted by Māori, with

Māori, for Māori. These principles also support *Tangata Whenuatanga*, the recognition that Māori learners are the original people of the land, reify the *reo* (language) and tikanga (values system) and underpin the work of the *kaiako*, educator. The *pakeha kaiako* works as an ally alongside Māori learners and cohorts, drawing on Māori-informed pedagogies of belonging. In effect, they are supportive *manuhiri* on the *marae.*

However, there is much in the *kōrero* above to apply to pedagogies of belonging. Creating the features of *Whānau Tangata* in every group or class (broadly, *whānau, hapū* and *iwi*, family, sub-tribe and people) builds engagement, trust and belonging (Te Huia, 2015). For example, using the *karakia* to open out and safely close the space of the learning time ensures those who belong are protected and receptive. Further, a *whanaungatanga* round to support inclusiveness and belonging characterises the start of any pedagogical sequence, such as a semester or a course. The marae as a place of organised turn-taking suggests the role of the *kaikorero/*speaker can be passed around, just as in the pedagogical community of practice where all attain a place to speak and belong. Such strategies build and foster *Ngā Hononga.* Importantly, within pedagogical contexts and discourse, the *kōrero* and the *pūrākau* are both modes of conversation or storytelling and methods of narration in classwork and research. The *Te Ao Māori* worldview informs curricula at all levels and underpins cultures of teaching and learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand and is itself grounded in a further concept, *Ako,* which denotes both reciprocal learning and also taking responsibility. It is intrinsically informed by belonging and *tamariki,* the development of self-esteem, and enhances the *mana* (prestige) of individuals, respecting their journeying identities. We have much to learn about belonging from Indigenous ways of being in the world.

Alisa's standpoint: Learning to belong differently

From my standpoint, I recognise belonging as contested, political, performative and in constant movement in a broad landscape (Wright, 2020; Probyn, 1996), and in some ways best defined by the person experiencing it at any point in time, as Wright (2015) suggests:

> *If belonging resonates because it means things to people, if it means different things to different people, if it is used in widely disparate ways, then perhaps what is most important about the term is the texture of how it is felt, used, practised and lived. These things may be unresolvable. After all, this is a term found in unexpected places and used in unexpected ways. Perhaps what is needed is a reflection on the ways that it is deployed that does not attempt to shut down its multiple meanings and uses* (p. 392).

In many ways, this is what we hoped this Special Issue would achieve.

So, for me personally, recognising the plural and ontological nature of belonging, I would like to pick up on Martin's focus on bringing Māori-informed pedagogies of belonging to the higher education sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and similarly advocate for bringing Aboriginal-informed worldviews and protocols into the curriculum and pedagogical space in the Australian higher education sector. I say this because while working on a belonging project at my own university, I have been struck by how unconsciously transactional and colonial our change processes can be. This is not entirely surprising. We know our universities, by the very fact of their current conditions of existence, size and operation, are compelled to apply the principles of self-managing corporate structures, valuing efficiency and scale, and the decontextualised and technology-first approaches this requires. I am not critiquing this entirely. The digital is ubiquitous. But there is an irony to 'doing belonging' in a way that is, in a sense, antithetical to the very nature of belonging, which I regard as deeply relational, processual, affective, ontological, and personal. And maybe part

of our problem is that in our 'contemporary' world, we think that there always must be a technological solution.

Perhaps I would not have noticed the nature of our change processes so much – I may have even accepted them as normal – if I was not also involved, simultaneously, in a program led by a Local Aboriginal Knowledge Holder where I am learning to be, belong, and become differently in the world – to myself as a disciplinary knowledge holder, to my landscape, to the idea of custodianship, to my role as an ally, to my community, to my culture, to the history of my Country, and to the dynamic, contested, and plural nature of belonging on Yuin Country. In this program, I am a non-Indigenous woman learning how to build authentic knowledge-based relationships between the knowledges embedded in Country and those of my discipline. The processes and protocols I experience in the program (see Kennedy et al., 2019) reflect those of the Māori-way described by Martin, but are relevant to this Country, this place, these people. The process is highly reflexive, using an Aboriginal way to engage, and beginning from who we are and where we are from, and extending to how we identify and identify-with both the tangible and intangible displays of Aboriginality in our landscapes. This is a cultural and intercultural experience for which there is no technological solution. I am also a member of the research team for this program, and we have been excited by the theoretical possibilities offered through the feminist human geographers who have already begun to build these kinds of knowledge-based relationships (e.g., Bawaka Country, 2015; Wright, 2015).

When I work in this space, I am always in a process of learning how to belong in relation to both the experience of and overt displays of difference; that is, to learn how to hold the 'same - not same' experience of plurality as a transformative politics of encounter (Askins, 2015). Together, our humanity and all of our human experiences are validated, acknowledged, and seen as a resource for shared learning and sense-making rather than something we need to leave at the door. The experience is values-driven (respect, responsibility, reciprocity) and governed by protocols (regularity, routine, relevance) that ensure all voices are heard and all contributions valued. It is a program that has given me hope for our future and this world, and I would like others to experience it too - but then how do we do that without scale or top-down transactional processes that create distance and separation instead of bringing people into relationship, dialogue and understanding? I feel like this work belongs in the space of professional learning for staff, which is not just reduced to a set of resources and techniques to apply in a classroom setting, or a one-off workshop, but takes a longitudinal approach to bringing people into deeper relation, firstly to provide a stronger sense of belonging to themselves, and then working out from there.

On closing

The current Special Issue, then, presents a further unpacking and wider understanding of pedagogies of belonging situated in university and disciplinary contexts. With 16 contributors coming from diverse fields of education, the volume reflects the breadth and depth of current discourse concerning pedagogy of belonging. We also welcome the Commentary from Emeritus Professor Ronald Barnett whose insightful contribution to this Issue on the student experience of 'homelessness', taking up the topos of spaces or places of belonging, we greatly appreciate. The Commentary provides a realistic view of the pedagogical aspects of student belonging while, like this Editorial, challenges the *status quo* and the notions of belonging/not belonging themselves.

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