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A sense of belonging in Australian higher education: the significance of self-efficacy and the student-educator relationship

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A sense of belonging in Australian higher education: the significance of self-efficacy and the student-educator relationship

Abstract

With recent massification policies and reforms, Australia's widening participation agenda has been instrumental in increasing participation of marginalised students in higher education. This paper considers how a sense of belonging can be instilled in marginalised students, improving retention and success and ultimately widening participation in higher education. It is recognised that one of the most important contributors to student engagement is the educator. Unfortunately, in academia today, educators are increasingly time-poor for several reasons including the neo-liberal nature of higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic and an emergency move to remote teaching. This article applies Bandura's concept of self-efficacy to highlight how, when nurtured effectively, the student-educator relationship can contribute to improving students' self-efficacy and their sense of belonging. Self-efficacy has been shown to affect aspirations, behavioural choices, maintenance of effort and affective reactions (Bandura, 1997), all of which can contribute to, or inhibit, students' academic success. Self-efficacy can be increased via four sources: mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and emotional and physiological states (Bandura, 1997). Central to this discussion is the value of vicarious experiences as a conduit between the educator and student in developing a student's self-efficacy. This article provides practical advice for educators so they may focus their efforts and build strong student relationships in the most effective manner.

Practitioner Notes

1. Utilise storytelling in teaching by planning and being intentional about what personal experiences will assist students to make connections to content being taught and strengthen the student-educator relationship.
2. Educators need to acknowledge that although self-sharing creates vulnerability, students will benefit through personally identifying with the educator, in-turn creating a sense of belonging.
3. Educators may not get to know all students due to limited time; however, students will feel that they personally know the educators just through the educator opening up and being real.
4. Educators should use multiple communication methods to reveal their personality to students, including all online resources, lectures, classes, emails and forums.
5. Developing a connection between student and educator assists with the students gaining a sense that they belong and are accepted into the field of university.

Keywords

self-efficacy, sense of belonging, marginalised students, social equity, widening participation, Bandura

Introduction

Social cognitive theory, proposed by Bandura (1977) has become one of the most influential theories underpinning learning and the development of self-efficacy in students. According to Bandura (1986), individuals can exercise a measure of control over their feelings, thoughts, motivations, and actions which, in turn, can regulate their behaviours. As such, it is a self-regulatory function with the capacity to influence a person's cognitive processes and actions. Bandura presents four sources from which these self-efficacy beliefs are developed: mastery, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and psychological states. Of these, the benefit of mastery experiences is highly researched and presented as the ideal method to improve self-efficacy in students (Zientek et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2000). However, this discussion paper argues that when the other sources of self-efficacy are woven into educators' pedagogical practices, it can instigate positive modelling that has the potential to increase both self-efficacy and the sense of belonging in their students. We locate this discussion paper within the scope of feminist discussions around the nature of affective pedagogical approaches that value relationships as an embedded approach as opposed to the "careless hegemonic masculinities" often associated with higher education (Motta & Bennett, 2018). Further, it is important to recognise that the reference to students and educators is inferred in a general sense and the authors recognise that these roles are undertaken in complex ways regardless of hegemonic and 'other' subjectivities. Therefore, it is not the intent to place a gender bias in this discussion.

This paper proposes that by strengthening the student-educator relationship, educators have the opportunity to contribute positively to a student's sense of self-efficacy and influence their sense of belonging within the university environment. After explaining the context and defining some key terms, this article presents the argument that building a strong modelling relationship with students in today's educational environment is highly desirable. However, there are two primary factors that make building this relationship especially challenging. Firstly, there is a perceived power differential as the educator presents as a figure of power in the field of higher education. Webb et al. (2002) suggest that educators can become so comfortable in their cultured habitus, they forget that their personal habitus was honed similar to the students they are teaching. Further to this is the system of higher education which is modelled on neoliberal hegemonic masculinities and based on "multiple micro-practices of bureaucratization and professionalization" (Motta & Bennett, 2018, p. 634) further exasperating power relations. Secondly, time pressures can limit educators in building student-centered relationships that allows a more personalised student centeredness (Larsen & Emmett, In print.) This is, in part, due to the neo-liberal nature of higher education; however, this has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to emergency remote online teaching (James et al., 2021; Larsen & Emmett, In print). This discussion presents some practical suggestions on how educators can utilise Bandura's concept of self-efficacy to improve students' sense of belonging through the student- educator relationship.

Background

It is a widely held belief that access to education is a human right, and access for all, no matter their birth, is one of the United Nations sustainability goals (DESA, 2021). Other discourses exist around access to higher education such as a neo-liberal discourse whereby higher education is desirable to produce a skilled workforce so nations can compete globally (Larsen & Emmett, 2021). Regardless of one's chosen discourse, nations strive for increased participation in higher education by marginalised groups which are currently underrepresented. In Australia, there has been improvement in accessibility to higher education; yet, even with the more recent

massification policies and reforms (See Bradley et al., 2008) there is still more to be done to reduce the socio-economic inequalities of access to higher education (Boliver, 2010; Bunn et al., 2020). Government policy in most economically developed nations shows a clear widening participation agenda aiming to increase social equity in higher education and support student retention and success, particularly among marginalised student groups.

The Bradley et al. (2008) report presented a social equity agenda which focused on 6 equity groups as defined by the Australian Government: Indigenous Australians, students with a disability, women in some disciplines, non-English-speaking background, low Socio-Economic Status (SES), and regional and remote students. There are however other student groups identified in the literature as underrepresented, and less likely to complete their studies and often, these students are referred to as non-traditional. This includes students from the LGBTIQ+ community (Waling & Roffee, 2018), refugees (Molla, 2021), those from out of home care (Harvey et al., 2015), students who are the first in their immediate family to attend university (O’Shea, 2020), and mature-aged students (Crawford & Emery, 2021). This article combines the above-mentioned groups and refers to them as marginalised students.

Within higher education in Australia, there are many universities located in regional and rural areas and their student footprint often includes a large majority of marginalised students. These students often lack the cultural capital and the aspiration to gain a higher education compared to the more traditional student base who enter with higher levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Devlin & McKay, 2017). Additionally, Australia has a number of enabling programs, also known as access, pre-tertiary, and preparatory, which are designed to upskill students' academic capacity and increase their student agency so they are better prepared to transition into an undergraduate degree (James, 2016). Therefore, this discussion paper refers to marginalised students in a generic sense as those being on the fringe of higher education with lower levels of cultural and academic capital and therefore, at risk of not understanding the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1986).

Unfortunately, marginalised students tend to experience higher levels of attrition (Hodges et al., 2013) yet there is pressure from universities to ensure students remain enrolled for funding purposes (Noble & Henderson, 2009). Much research has shown that these students face additional challenges transitioning to university (James, 2016; Willans & Seary, 2011), developing student agency (Webb et al., 2002) and experiencing a sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Within literature, Bourdieu's (1973) concept of cultural capital is often used to argue that marginalised students lack the cultural and academic capital required to be successful at university. Yet, this paper proposes that developing a student's self-efficacy will assist them in building their sense of student agency and aligning their habitus to the field of education, in turn, affording them the opportunity to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging to the university.

Sense of Belonging

Defining a sense of belonging (SoB) in respect to marginalised students is a complex matter with many considerations. There is a body of literature that examines the complexity of belonging (see Pedler, et al., 2016; Gillen-O’Neel, 2019; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015); however, there can be both productive and counterproductive impacts for marginalised students. SoB in the higher university sector has been described as “students’ subjective feelings of connection and integration with their institution and campus community” (Pedler et al., 2022, p. 398). However, for marginalised students, the field of university can be quite foreign and often the rules and regulations, explicit and tacit, can feel overwhelming. Pedler et al. (2022) suggests that students who experience a mismatch between their background and the institution are at a higher risk of attrition and this is supported by Thomas (2011) who states that belonging is ‘critical to student retention and success

(p. 10). A student's SoB is an important factor to how they feel connected to the university and the people within the institution.

Research by Pedler et al. (2022) suggests that students who have a stronger sense of belonging tend to have more "academic self-confidence, higher motivation, higher levels of academic engagement and higher achievement" (p. 398). Furthermore, the period of transition to higher education is also considered a critical period of adjustment and transition issues are felt more acutely by marginalised student groups. Crawford and Emery (2021) suggest that universities' operations, curriculum delivery and course design that are focused on "'implied', 'ideal' or 'traditional' students are out of step with contemporary student demographics" especially within the Australian higher education context (p. 11). Therefore, interrogating the notion of belonging for marginalised students is important to ensure students are feeling a sense of connectedness with their studies.

Ahn and Davis (2020) present four domains of SoB which include: social engagement, academic engagement, surroundings, and personal space. In particular, their results suggest that social engagement is the most salient of these domains. Hughes (2017) supports this notion as their research found that students highly value the relationship developed with educators and this further supports Ahn and Davis's (2020) social engagement factor. Consequently, they state that fostering a SoB is "one of the most crucial tasks facing academics" (Hughes, 2017, p. 26). When considering what the sense of belonging means in the context of marginalised students, Goodenow (1993, 80 as cited in Ahn & Davis, 2020) suggests that it centers around the students feeling a sense of acceptance through the development of a deeper connection to the university. Similarly, Tinto (2012) describes it as a 'membership' which comes from the perception of involvement and a sense of being supported. Amaral da Fontoura, (2012) presents an even more personalised representation suggesting that a student's SoB is fostered through effective instruction, combined with curriculum that is meaningful and presented by educators in a warm and respectful manner. It is this notion that guides this paper as we propose that it is through building an environment of trust and respect between student and educator that begins the process of developing a SoB within the university sector.

However, the antithesis to this is self-doubt and the imposter syndrome that many marginalised students feel upon entering university, and it can be a significant barrier to forming a SoB (Bandura, 1997). Thus, the relationship between self-efficacy and a SoB is two-fold. Firstly, improving the student-educator relationship assists in helping the students to re-frame the way they think about their capability as a student, improve motivation and increases self-regulated learning. Research shows a clear link between self-efficacy and factors such as self-regulation and self-motivation (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Pajares, 1996). Secondly, an improved student-educator relationship directly and positively impacts a student's sense of self-efficacy and in-turn enhances their SoB to the university sector because they feel valued and supported (Devlin & Mckay, 2017; Pajares, 1996).

However, learning new things involves an element of risk. Jarvis (2018) suggests that if students can re-frame education, not as a risk, but an opportunity, they will be more inclined to negotiate risk and use it as a learning opportunity. Therefore, learners require guidance on how to be robust and resilient as well as be encouraged to adopt a curious mindset and feel safe and supported in their learning environment (Jarvis, 2018). For students to gain the most benefit of a truly supportive and engaging environment, they must feel a SoB within the field of education, but also, they need to see that the time and effort they put in will have positive future consequences. Thus

far, it is clear that building a SoB is vital, but complex, and as Tice et al. (2021) suggest, potentially time-consuming for educators. Notwithstanding the drawbacks, Tice et al., (2021) believe that “just by merely being present, giving your students your time to build a relationship with you and others does a great deal for building interpersonal connections that are so central to feeling a sense of belonging to university” (p. 9).

Unfortunately, within the university environment, educators have limited opportunities to interact personally with students. This is due to the power relations within the field of higher education. The ‘place’ of university is described by Cant (2018) as a “social and historical space with rules and boundaries that shape interaction and social possibilities” (p. 319). Modern universities have proved that they can compete on equal terms with the traditional universities in regard to academic quality and excellence due to what Tatlow (2012) calls their student-centered teaching approach. Within a more modern university, interaction between educators and students could involve a lecture and tutorial or workshop, and, in addition, these classes could be taught either internally or online via digital platforms. Typically, tutorials or workshops involve a smaller number of students which allows for more personal interactions with the educator. However, the educator's role is complex as they often juggle multiple tasks, responsibilities and heavy workloads (Kenny & Fluck, 2014). In addition, often not acknowledged is the power relations between the university and sessional educators where there are expectations for teaching and marking, but unrealistic expectations for the time required to build relationships with their student cohort. Therefore, when combining all factors, it suggests that educators are time-poor in the higher education system; however, improving the student-educator relationship is a vital part of increasing student self-efficacy and fostering a SoB.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Understandably, in the time-poor tertiary sector, although educators may strive to build a sense of connection with their students, there is the tension of the perceived time commitment required to develop rapport with individual students and this is a valid objection, especially with the added layer of concern of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic impacted higher education and marginalised students in a number of ways, from practical to psychological, and it has added additional stress to both student and educators (James et al., 2021). Additionally, there has been negative financial impact through loss of income as the number of full fee-paying international students has drastically declined. Peters et al. (2020, pp. 36-37) found that the pandemic “created an immense fiscal crisis for universities” that has forced universities “to place economic rationality and economic goals first.” An estimate of the losses to Australian universities attributed to the decreased international student enrolments is between \$3 billion and \$4.6 billion (Universities Australia, 2020b). This fiscal crisis has resulted in many universities implementing redundancies and offers of early retirement packages. These staffing cuts inevitably impact negatively on the workload and stress of remaining staff who have already been experiencing significant increases in their workloads. Prior to the pandemic, research suggested that academic staff regularly worked additional unpaid hours to perform an array of complex and diverse tasks, not the least of which related to teaching duties (Kenny & Fluck, 2014).

There is also compelling evidence that staff to student ratios have increased over time, indicating that educators are, each year, teaching a higher number of students. Data from TEQSA (2022) showed that in 2018, the ratio sat at 18.7:1, whilst *The Good Universities Guide* (2022) stated that in 2021/22 the ratio was 21:1. Without conducting an institution-by-institution survey, these figures indicate that educators are currently dealing with learning groups that are larger than they have been in previous years. It is a reasonable assessment that workload increases will intensify

the negative impacts on educators' physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing. This demonstrates a very complex balance of power and priorities as needs of the educator, students and universities are navigated within a pandemic.

For the university sector, COVID-19 presented a disruption to normal teaching practice due to a rapid shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) which had an increased emphasis on online teaching. There is evidence to suggest that students, particularly marginalised students, prefer face to face teaching (Sadowski, Stewart & Pedititis, 2017) and are concerned about successfully building relationships with educators and peers in an online environment (James et al., 2021; Joubert et al., 2022). Additionally, with this forced change to ERT, educators have been compelled to rapidly adapt learning and teaching materials for online delivery which has increased administrative tasks and placed additional pressure on educators and support staff. Although this might indicate that it had a negative impact on building a SoB, some more recent articles (See: Heath et al., 2020; James et al., 2021) suggests that educators rose to the challenge and were able to reduce the sense of fear and unfamiliarity within the online environment. Additionally, it also afforded universities, educators and students an opportunity to foster adaptive coping responses which can also develop mental, emotional and interpersonal skills (Heath et al., 2020).

Building relationships with students and the associated emotional labor involved is an innate part of an educator's role but it is rarely formally recognised by the university, again demonstrating the complex power relations at work (Hughes, 2017). However, recent research has shown that educators working with marginalised students, intending to 'go the extra mile' for their students, often sacrifice their personal time to make themselves available outside of office hours (Johnson et al., 2021). This highlights the need for educators to consider how they can be more effective with developing rapport with their students in this ever-changing educational environment. Bandura's social cognitive theory provide us with suggestions that effectively increase self-efficacy and instill a SoB in students.

Self-Efficacy

This discussion article examines the concept of belonging through the lens of Bandura's self-efficacy. According to Bandura "perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize [sic] and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). When applied to academic endeavors, self-efficacy essentially refers to whether the student believes they are capable, or not capable, of succeeding in higher education. More specifically, this concept reflects a student's belief in their competence and academic aptitude to learn and apply knowledge through exams, academic assessments, classroom discourse and in real-world contexts (Solberg, et al., 1993 as cited in Wood et al., 2015). This, in turn, affects aspirations, behavioral choices, maintenance of effort and affective reactions (Bandura, 1997).

There is a large body of literature which supports Bandura's concept of self-efficacy as a predictor of academic performance (See: Schunk, 2003; Talsma et al., 2018; Zimmerman, 2000). Multiple learning environments have been studied that link academic self-efficacy to performance including primary and secondary schooling, tertiary education, and different subjects and discipline areas (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016). Bandura (1997) posits four methods to increase self-efficacy: mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and positive affective states. These descriptors all play a role in building a student's sense of efficacy, and in turn, as their efficacy increases, so does their SoB to the field of higher education. In the case of marginalised students, as they develop self-efficacy, they will begin to feel that they belong to the field of higher education and no longer placed on the margins. However, the development of self-efficacy is only partly undertaken in a personal sense. Each of the descriptors require an external

element and for students, that element would be the educator. Therefore, this discussion paper posits that it is through the development of the student/educator relationship that the sources of self-efficacy can be developed in students and in-turn, it fosters a SoB for marginalised students. After briefly conceptualising each of the sources of self-efficacy, this discussion will consider how educational experiences between the educator and student can instill a deeper SoB to the university context.

Mastery

Mastery experiences are the prior successes and failures an individual has at a specific task, or one closely related (Bandura, 1997). Experiences that the individual deems to be positive or successful will increase self-efficacy and those experiences deemed to be negative or a failure will decrease self-efficacy. According to the literature this source of self-efficacy has been the most researched, and ultimately, influential across multiple fields including education (Pajares, 1996; Zientek et al., 2019). Educators contribute to student's mastering the skills of study through curriculum development, assessments and pedagogical approaches that challenge the students (Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

Verbal Persuasion

Verbal persuasion increases self-efficacy when the recipient receives genuine messages from people that they deem competent in relation to the task, or one closely related (Bandura, 1997). Feedback that is encouraging or uplifting will increase self-efficacy for a task and negative assertions are likely to decrease task efficacy (Zientek et al., 2019). Schunk (1991) found that when students receive positive persuasive feedback, it enhanced their self-efficacy; however, he prefaces that it may only be temporary if subsequent efforts turn out poorly. Therefore, Margolis and McCabe (2006) suggests that verbal persuasion given by educators must be credible and encouraging.

Psychological

Individuals' affective states or emotional reactions to tasks impact self-efficacy and motivation levels (Zientek et al., 2019). Positive emotions, such as a sense of pride in a task undertaken will contribute to students' motivation and engagement which in turn improves academic performance (Deshler et al., 2019; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Moreover, negative emotions like frustration or anxiety can detract from students' motivation and engagement (Deshler et al., 2019; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Another example is self-doubt, as Bandura (1997) explains, "[i]t is difficult to achieve much while fighting self-doubt" (p. 117). Educators play a role in providing pastoral care through their words of encouragement (Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

Vicarious experiences

Students acquire validation about their capabilities through observing others perform tasks or modelling. Known as vicarious experiences, these instill a persuasive notion whereby students begin to believe that they have the potential to succeed because others of similar backgrounds have foreground their experience of education. There are two factors that require consideration to ensure that the modelling is effective. Firstly, the tasks must be similar. For example, seeing a peer successfully solving math equations will not be effective for increasing self-efficacy regarding essay writing. Secondly, it is imperative that individuals view the person modeling as similar to themselves (Schunk, 1999 as cited in Zientek et al., 2019) and these similarities include "age,

race, gender, ability, interests, clothing, social circles, and achievement levels” (Margolis & McCabe, 2006, p. 221). As Zimmerman (2000) shares, “if a model is viewed as more able or talented, observers will discount the relevance of the model’s performance outcomes for themselves” (p. 88; See also Zientek et al., 2019). Therefore, when considering the student-educator relationship, factors for effective modelling due to the power differential are addressed in the discussion below.

Discussion

Vulnerability of educators

Central to this discussion is the value of vicarious experiences as a conduit between the educator and student in developing a student’s self-efficacy. Social relationships can affect one’s affective state and therefore have a significant impact on levels of self-efficacy. More importantly, however, the student-educator relationship goes further than a purely ‘social’ one and consequently, it is a vital form of rapport for modelling through mediated experiences. Educators sharing personal qualities and similarities with students is considered a central part of relationship building (Hughes, 2017). When educators share personal experiences that align to a student’s current habitus, it affords the students the opportunity to make a connection with the educator of the past and makes the sharing more relevant. However, there are aspects that need to be considered around educators sharing their own experiences with students. Choosing what is appropriate to share with students and what should remain private is highly individualised and consequently will always require an appropriate level of emotional intelligence.

Another aspect which is a potential barrier to educators sharing their experiences with students is the associated vulnerability (James, 2021). Educators are likely to feel vulnerable given that self-sharing has the potential to shift the power relations between student and educator. It is important to accept that some power imbalances will always exist because of the educator’s professional duty to critique, mark and provide feedback on student’s work. Similarly, the complex power relationship between the educators and the university should be considered. Both modern and traditional universities have codes of conduct that need to underpin an educators’ teaching practice as they are in a position of trust and are expected to be honest, fair and impartial in their educational role. Nevertheless, the effective use of emotional intelligence and intentionality when self-sharing offers modelling opportunities that demonstrate that the educator understands the students’ various educational levels.

Modelling and storytelling

Storytelling has been synonymous with learning for centuries and it is an effective technique in the process of learning. Abrahamson (1998) clarifies that individuals gain a better understanding through the use of concrete examples instead of vague abstractions that have no connection to real life experiences. Therefore, storytelling provides a framework by which educators can share their past experiences so that students can make a deeper connection. Keehn (2015) found that students studying social diversity experienced storytelling as engaging and integral to their learning. Abrahamson (1998) claims that

teller and the listener come together on a cognitive and emotional level that allows the listener to relate to the teller from his or her own personal framework and thus grasp the teller's perception of the content at the same time (p. 1).

Educators can share personal anecdotes that relate to what the student is learning, and it provides a point of reference whereby the student can experience it through the eyes of another. The anecdotes could be actual experiences during their first year of study, the first university essay the educator ever wrote, an embarrassing situation that ended up being a learning experience, or link to a real-world experience to best describe the concepts being taught. Storytelling which fosters a connection between student and educators can occur face-to-face or even in an asynchronous online environment. Additionally, Tait et al. (2015) discuss the importance of using humour to capture students' attention with one participant (educator) advocating for "telling humorous anecdotes...using funny stories as teachable moments" (p. 10). However, whilst Keehn (2015) and Tait et al. (2015) focus on student interest and learning and the value of storytelling, the counter argument questions how to undertake this whilst still maintaining your authority as an educator. Webb et al. (2002) suggests that when educators feel this sense of vulnerability, they perceive that it undermines their structurally determined relationship of power. Therefore, the key rule to apply is to only share appropriate stories that have a connection to the classroom and student experience. Even with this security in place, the educator is sharing part of their own experience in a way that shows vulnerability. The benefit, however, is that this vulnerability allows students to identify more readily with the educator despite their differences in their cultural capital. Storytelling can effectively occur through both synchronous or asynchronous interaction. Therefore, humour, self-sharing and storytelling provides a valuable opportunity to build student-educator relationships, develop self-efficacy, and inspire academic achievement vicariously.

Engaging resources

Allowing the students to 'see' you and connect on a more emotional level can also be done through a range of digital resources. As Rapanta et al. (2020) share, "synchronous technologies might allow a seemingly more authentic performance of self because it occurs in real time with less contrivance" (p. 930). In asynchronous learning situations, such as pre-recorded lectures, the style of presentation can still foster a connection to the educator. Although the educator may not be personally interacting with students during asynchronous learning, inadvertently, the students are making a connection to the educator through the digital platform and, therefore, fostering a SoB. Even though it is a one-way connection, it should still be viewed as an opportunity for modelling and forming a connection that can foster a SoB. When considering the most effective type of asynchronous learning, Tice et al. (2021) suggests short video "lectures" rather than more traditional, longer lectures. This is supported by Kahu (n.d.) who suggests recording short 20–25-minute mini lectures that students can download. The point of uncertainty remains about whether a formal or casual approach should be taken, and this depends on the type of connection the educator is wanting to develop.

For a SoB to occur, the student needs to see a real person. Kahu et al.'s (2018) research focuses on engagement of first year undergraduate students. Kahu believes that the videos should show the lecturer as a real person, and shares that her recordings "are not pre-recorded or professionally made; it is me, smiling, sitting at my desk, chatting to the student about the upcoming week" (p. 1). Note the emphasis on informality and the casual language used when discussing the mini lectures. If a mistake is made, perhaps a stutter, cough or mispronounced word, her advice is to make the correction verbally but do not re-record the video to show perfection. While this means some vulnerability for educators, the goal is for students to see that their educators are normal people. Kahu (n.d.) acknowledges that a mini lecture can be used as a way to connect with students and for educators to share their personalities as they are casually "chatting" to students. Such communication can be a blend of natural conversation and the intentional and thought-out use of personal anecdotes and humor.

Asynchronous learning

The recent transition to asynchronous teaching through digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic presented some challenges to educators and students alike. As previously mentioned, an asynchronous environment does not prevent students from developing a SoB as they are still connecting vicariously to their educators. However, research during the COVID-19 pandemic (see James et al., 2021; James et al., 2022 in press) suggests that educators were able to transition to an online environment and develop personal relationships through pedagogical approaches that engaged the students through a blended approach of both synchronous and asynchronous practices. Tice et al. (2021) support this and suggests that online classes can be effectively used to build relationships between students and educators. Some practical suggestions to build collegiality and a sense of trust begin with the educator being available.

Ideally, this could mean being online ahead of time for questions or just available to respond to questions or run a more social Q&A session; however, institutional factors such as workloads and casual staffing may exclude this as a possibility. Kahu (n.d.) suggests allowing time for informal sharing by the educator, and she recommends recording these classes for students who are unable to attend as it affords them the opportunity to observe the culture and feel connected to the educator. However, this advice should be carefully considered as it may be difficult to maintain a casual culture during the online class if it is being recorded. In a recent study by James et al., (2021), students valued the way the lecturers were available and ready to support them at their point of need. They also appreciated the sense of connectedness they found with their peers and educators. In a follow-up paper, James et al. (2022) found that effective online communication afforded more personal interactions and a deeper level of connectedness. Both synchronous and asynchronous teaching offers many opportunities for educators to share vicariously and enable a SoB within the online classroom.

Written communication

In the world of online learning there are many possible communication methods, but the most common student-educator forms of written communication are emails and forum posts. There are many ways that this simple form of communication can enhance a SoB for students. For instance, Kahu (n.d.) creates a 'weekly news' email for her first-year students. She recommends making it visually stimulating and including simplified information such as brief to-do lists (Kahu, n.d.). Salem and Mann (2017) also found success with a weekly newsletter format that was visually stimulating and reminded online students of tasks to complete and dates to remember. Kahu (n.d.) mentions simple strategies such as forward planning and creating templates of a cyclic nature to assist educators in ensuring consistency with sending regular communications. It is important to maintain a level of professionalism by modelling good grammar and formatting in a professional way; however, an approachable, friendly tone is of value and personal touches affords a deeper sense of connection to the educator. Online communications should not be underestimated as a valuable way of modelling to students. This in turn shows students they are not dissimilar to their educators. It is through modelling that educators demonstrate collegial communication styles and therefore foster self-efficacy and SoB at university.

Conclusion

This paper has examined some existing advice for improving student engagement and ensuring that students feel a SoB within the classroom. With the key focus on marginalised students, it highlights that the student-educator relationship is crucial in developing their sense of self-efficacy

around being a student. Through the lens of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, it has argued that the utilisation of the four sources of self-efficacy can initiate positive modelling despite the power differential between educators and marginalised students. This has the potential to increase both self-efficacy and the SoB within higher education.

This discussion paper notes that although there is a sense of vulnerability when educators 'open up' and share personal anecdotes and stories, if undertaken with emotional intelligence, it allows educators to maintain a higher level of professionalism whilst affording students the opportunity to connect concepts to real-life experiences. Also included throughout the discussion are a range of practical strategies that can be implemented either through an online mode of study or in the way educators communicate with their students. The power of developing relationships between an educator and student cannot be underestimated in the discussion around building a SoB within the higher education sector. It is, therefore, timely as we head into a post-pandemic world, that educators revisit their notions of how to engage students in the learning process and question how they are ensuring they are developing collegial and supportive relationships with their students.

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. The authors report no special sources of funding for this study.

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