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# Allies as guides in the borderlands: The development of an online Ally Program to foster belonging for LGBTIQ+ students and staff at a regional university

## Abstract

As minorities, people of diverse sexual orientations and genders often feel that they do not belong within higher education. To combat this, connection is important, but that can be difficult in the uncertain, predominantly online world of universities. The Ally Program is a university-wide, extra-curricular online training program aimed at creating connection for LGBTIQ+ students and staff. This paper presents a critically reflective autoethnographic study of my 12 years of experience in developing the Ally Program through the writing and analysis of four creative narratives. These narratives centre on the epiphanies I had as a trainer that led to significant refinements of the training. Using borderlands discourse as my theoretical framework, I demonstrate how my own sense of belonging developed and how that enabled me to create a safe space for participants in the program to feel a sense of belonging and share this with the wider university community. I further explain the teaching model I have created, drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development as a pedagogical framework to promote meaningful, engaged learning in the borderlands. I show how these frameworks intertwine to enable participants to embrace uncertainty, allowing for learning to evolve over time and space, and ultimately fostering a sense of belonging for all LGBTIQ+ students and staff. This model of teaching for belonging is useful across many different learning environments to embrace diversity and encourage belonging.

## Practitioner Notes

1. People of diverse sexual orientations and genders often feel excluded in educational settings due to discrimination and lack of visibility, so specific training programs around this diversity are needed, incorporating a wide range of identities.
2. Critically reflexive, narrative autoethnography provides a way to present stories as data where it is important to deeply explore individual experiences and social interactions and their impact on teaching programs.
3. For training programs around sexual orientation and gender diversity to be successful, it is vital that trainers have a sense of belonging themselves, foster a sense of belonging for all participants, and can help participants pay that forward to the wider community.
4. Borderlands discourse provides a useful theoretical framework to examine difference, especially where there may be a sense of disconnect between two apparent 'sides'.
5. The Zone of Proximal Development provides a foundation for an effective pedagogy for teaching in the 'borderlands' space of diverse gender and sexual identities, when implemented in specific ways.

## Keywords

online training, pedagogy of belonging, autoethnography, borderlands theory, Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development

## Introduction

In a world where we have recently experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, where lock-downs have been sprung on cities and countries, and the future is so uncertain that it can change in an instant, it is extremely difficult to find connections – a sense of belonging. In Australia, university education that had traditionally been on campus was temporarily forced online, and the usual bustle of a campus, or buzz of social gatherings all but disappeared. The impact was heightened for those who identify with a minority group, specifically the LGBTIQ+ community, because of the discrimination faced on a daily basis and the inherent difficulties of finding like-minded people. Due to the anxiety produced by isolation for this group, it has become more important than ever to develop programs to connect people, to foster a sense of belonging, especially for students and staff at universities. The issue, as Barnett (2012) points out, is how do we do that when we do not know what the future brings?

This paper proposes a particular, online training program, the Ally Program, as a model for promoting belonging for LGBTIQ+ staff and students within a Western university context. Here it is useful to define belonging following Tice, Baumeister, Crawford, Allen, and Percy (2021) in terms of “how comfortable they are being themselves at their institution, feeling valued at the institution, and feeling part of the community” (p. 3). I would also add that the sense of feeling comfortable is the primary reason a sense of belonging is a counter measure to anxiety. As I identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community myself, I am well positioned to use autoethnography to reflect on my own sense of belonging, my involvement in the training, and the impact on the sense of belonging for other staff and students. Through a series of four creative narratives spanning my 12 years of being lead trainer, I illustrate how I developed an innovative pedagogy grounded in theories around navigating borderland spaces. The significance of this model is that it answers Barnett’s question proposed above. Through using theoretical and pedagogical models that *embrace* uncertainty, actively explore the unknown, in space, time, and the human condition, I show that education through professional development for both staff and students *can* contend with an unknown world. In so doing the model provides a space where anxiety can be acknowledged and overcome, and LGBTIQ+ staff and students can feel a greater sense of comfort and belonging.

The CQUniversity Ally Program incorporates online asynchronous training as a means of staff professional development or as an extra-curricular ‘micro-credential’ for students, and as a point of difference adds a synchronous (via Zoom) session. All staff and students are welcome, no matter how they identify. Through this training, they become ‘allies’ to support LGBTIQ+ students and staff. As it is designed for anyone and everyone to be involved, an important part of the training model is to employ a pedagogically sound technique to actually teach people the relevant knowledge, understanding and skills for navigating connection in somewhat new and strange educational and social spaces. This then forms a network of people willing to step up and be guides in this relative online ‘wilderness’, this borderland between the majority and the minority. Hence these guides, or allies, become the teachers, and pass on the understanding needed for connection to happen. Connection and a sense of belonging is imperative to ease anxiety, especially for minority groups. It is, however, the *way* we teach for belonging that is paramount to the success of any initiative developed for that end goal.

### **LGBTIQ+ Community**

'LGBTIQ+' is an initialism of the words people use to describe their sexual orientation, gender and sex. The initialism stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer. The '+' reflects the fact the letters of the initialism do not capture the entire spectrum of sexual orientations, gender identities and intersex variations, and as such the acronym is not intended to be limiting or exclusive of certain groups.

In 2020, the Private Lives 3 report showed that people who identify as LGBTIQ+ are particularly vulnerable, with their sense of self worth and actual survival hinging on feeling like they belong. The report was produced by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) and presented the outcomes of "Australia's largest national survey of the health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people to date" (Hill, Bourne, McNair, Carman, & Lyons, 2020, p. 14). It showed that people who identify as having diverse sexual orientations and/or genders have a reported suicide attempt rate "ten times higher than... the general Australian population" (Hill et al., 2020, p. 51). As a counter measure, a sense of belonging within any community was vital. This could be fostered online, with many study participants reporting that "accessing LGBTIQ social media and such online forums may be beneficial in further connecting and engaging people" (Hill et al., 2020, p. 80).

The survey found that only 60% of LGBTIQ+ people felt accepted "a lot" or "always" at work, and only 55% at an educational institution (Hill et al., 2020, p. 37). Clearly, although not all people feel excluded, for the large number who do not feel accepted, there cannot be the mind-space to be a productive learner or worker. Therefore, having community visibility, active avenues for networking, and clear programs for inclusion are absolutely imperative in a university context for LGBTIQ+ employees and students to feel a sense of belonging. However, it can be difficult to enact this visibility, networking and inclusion, especially in a post-COVID world.

### **University Context**

CQUniversity is a multi-campus, regional higher education provider, with approximately 30% of its 30,000 students studying vocational courses (Certificate 1 to Diploma) and 70% at Bachelor level or higher. Before the pandemic, just over 50% of students studied solely online, while the rest were dispersed predominantly across campuses in six regional Queensland towns and three capital cities. During the pandemic, all students 'became' online students. The university states that one of its core values is Inclusiveness, seeking to "embrace and celebrate diversity" and create "safe and inclusive environments" (CQUniversity Australia, 2021).

### **The Ally Program**

Ally and similar programs have been offered in many universities throughout Australia and are predominantly designed as networking and support for people who identify as LGBTIQ+, and as such are useful to foster a sense of belonging. I introduced an Ally Program to CQUniversity after I attended a train-the-trainer session run by another university in December 2009 while working in the Student Support Centre. During 2010 and 2011, assisted by another staff member, I developed a CQUniversity-specific training program, which was initially run for a group of Student Mentors on a single campus in 2011. We took the training to other regional CQUniversity campuses through 2012. In 2013, it was rolled out to all students and staff, then with me as sole trainer. As CQUniversity had more than 10 physical locations, and a large proportion of the students were

studying by distance, I transitioned the program to its current form online. The program is now run from the School of Access Education, where I am a lecturer, with support from the Student Support Centre and People and Culture (HR).

The current CQUniversity Ally Program is open to all interested staff and students. It includes an online space for announcements, forum discussions, resources and links, to which any student or staff member can opt in. Once in the network, these students and staff can self-select to do the Ally training which consists of self-paced, online modules supplemented by an interactive, synchronous Zoom session. When they have completed the training, the Allies are listed on an intranet page as contacts for other students and staff. Allies need not necessarily identify as LGBTIQ+, although many do, or have family or friends in the community. In general, Allies provide support for students and staff, acting as a listening ear and referring them to appropriate services. They are also a tangible sign that the university is an inclusive and diverse environment where it is safe to be yourself, and to help combat discrimination through education or reporting processes. Allies take what they have learnt in training and ‘pay it forward’ so the whole community benefits.

### ***Current project***

The Ally Program is the critical means for staff and students at CQUniversity to enact inclusiveness and promote a sense of belonging for LGBTIQ+ people. Hence the way the training is conducted, what it includes, the manner it is presented, the activities involved must be analysed to ensure the Program is meeting its aim. However, research is lacking into the effectiveness of training curricula and pedagogy across such programs. One paper from the United States by Woodford, Kolb, Durocher-Radeka, and Javier (2014) analysed what should be covered in the training, but not how the training should be delivered. That is what this current paper will discuss.

Also, due to the sensitive nature of the program, it was not feasible to collect quantitative feedback data. As I am situated at the cross-roads of the training and the experience of the community, it was prudent to use a qualitative methodology that allowed me to take a critically reflective lens of my own involvement in the program over the last 12 years, and although there were several that could be useful, I chose autoethnography for reasons expanded below. I analysed my own involvement, and that of the participants, through creative, autoethnographic stories, following Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010), and drew parallels between my experiences and aspects of Borderlands Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987). In so doing, in this paper I focus on three levels of belonging. First is my own sense of identity and belonging as a member of the LGBTIQ+ community and as a trainer, capable of and legitimate enough to conduct the work. Second is the sense of belonging of the participants in the training and their confidence in their future roles as Allies. Third is the work of the Allies in helping foster a sense of belonging for LGBTIQ+ people in the wider university community. I then relate the theory to the existing pedagogical framework of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and demonstrate explicitly how this is a pedagogy critical to enhance belonging, and that is effective in helping people be Allies in this “borderland”. This mix of theoretical framework and pedagogy could be implemented in many training programs to enhance efficacy in teaching for belonging.

### **Methodology**

Autoethnography was an advantageous methodology to use for this study for several reasons. First, it allowed deep exploration and analysis of a situation where there was more value in the experiences

than in quantitative data. As Ellis et al. (2010) say, autoethnography focuses on “producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience” (p. 2). Second, it allowed me to reflect on my own identity as researcher within the context of the study, and draws the reader into the lived experiences of the researcher. In other words, to be a professional trainer, I had to grapple with my own identity, a struggle that Dall’Alba (2009) describes as an “interplay between openness and resistance [that] not only challenges our knowing or actions, but also who we are and understand ourselves to be” (p. 41). Again, Ellis et al. (2010) argue that autoethnography is “research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence” (p. 2). Third, it allowed me to select particular aspects of the experience to highlight a particular theoretical framework. In other words, I was able to “compress years of research into a single text” (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 2) by writing “retrospectively and selectively... about epiphanies” (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 4). This presented the opportunity for me to look longitudinally at the Ally program, and draw out the critical “aha” moments that led to real, perceptible, beneficial change to the way I ran the program.

For this paper I wrote a series of four short stories from my own perspective and these formed the data for analysis. They were based on factual events, and drew on the wealth of informal feedback I had gathered, and presented the sort of rich, experiential data that would be difficult to portray in any other way. The stories were carefully constructed to show the development of the program, my own progression, and how I improved the program over time. By using creative non-fiction I could emphasize critical information and highlight both my own reactions and those of others. As Mizzi (2010) points out, stories provide space for the characters to play out “the plural and sometimes contradictory narrative voices located within the researcher” (p. 2). The stories were specifically chosen, as Ellis et al. (2010) encourage the researcher to do, to trace the evolution of my work as a trainer through the three levels of belonging: my own, that of the Allies undergoing the training, and that of people who identify as LGBTQ+ in the broader university community.

I then related my experiences as a trainer to theoretical frameworks in the literature. One that rang particularly true to me was Anzaldúa’s (1987) Borderlands framework. Through critical analysis following the guidance of Ellis et al. (2010) I used “vignettes, reflexivity, and introspection as an emergent process” (p. 6) to question, compare and contrast my experiences to the theoretical framework. I could relate incidents in the stories I had written to this framework as a way to understand what was happening around the sense of belonging for myself, the participants, and the wider community who interact with the university. This is detailed in the section of this paper discussing borderlands theory. However, my analysis took me further, enabling me to show that Vygotsky’s ZPD is especially effective for teaching within this space because it enabled me to embrace the borderlands framework within the practical dimensions of the training. Vygotsky proposed that “the zone of proximal development [is] the distance between the actual level... and the level of potential... in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). I will show in this paper that this “distance” or “zone” is very much akin to a borderland, unfixed, moving and the experience of which is unique to each learner, and the “more capable peers” are the Allies or guides. Hence I will show how the two frameworks work especially well when combined.

## Reflection through narrative

### ***Story 1: Inaugural Training***

I was shaking. It was my first time delivering the Ally training since I did the training myself, and that had been nerve-wracking enough! Although we had changed parts of the presentation, putting our own flair on it, we had decided to keep the introduction, in which the trainers described their own identities. I decided to sit and I perched myself on a table. This was it. No going back. This was the point I had to out myself to these participants – who were all students! I could hardly hear what Misty, my fellow trainer, was saying as she introduced herself. She was female, and heterosexual. My turn. I stabilised myself, did not look at anyone. I was sure I was only whispering.

“I’m Gemma, I identify as female, and I’m a (I could hardly articulate the word) lesbian.” No grunts or gasps, that was a good thing. I looked at Misty. She did not skip a beat and went on to introduce the first slide. Phew! I finally took a breath. But why was I so nervous? This was the Ally training after all. These people were there because they wanted to support LGBTIQ+ people. Surely they would be the last people to judge.

Maybe it was because I just had never had to say it in a professional setting before. Maybe because I still felt like an outsider. I was definitely outside the norm of the group that was doing the training, as none of the students said they were anything but cisgender and heterosexual. I have always been made to feel different, and there I was, saying it out loud, again, to a group of straight people.

The training went by just as planned, following the slides, content and activities. At the end the participants all thanked us for the day.

“Thanks Gemma,” one said. “You have provided such great insights into what it is like to belong to a minority group, and one where there is still a lot of discrimination and lack of understanding. It is great to have a trainer who identifies as part of the LGBTIQ+ community, as it adds such a personal touch.”

I blushed, and looked at my shoes. But inside I was celebrating. Misty approached me after the training.

“It’s true,” she said. “I couldn’t do that on my own. It is incredibly valuable having you on board this.”

Inside I was doing a happy dance.

### ***Story 2: Online Games***

“First, let’s become familiar with some terminology,” I announced. I was now the sole trainer and had moved the training online. It was, however, still quite similar to the face-to-face training. I shared my screen and a list of words and definitions appeared on the slide. I had already explained why it was important to have some common understanding, to help people connect with others who identified in the same or similar ways.

“For example,” I had said, “we all kind of know what a nurse does, even though not every nurse does exactly identical tasks. It just allows them to identify with other nurses, and know they have something in common.”

We did the basics, gay, lesbian, bisexual and so on, and I gave the definitions that had been included in the instructor training we had been given. Then we moved on to the more niche identities. One of the words was 'bear' and again, I stated the definition. One participant spoke up.

"Nah, that's not right. I am a bear, and I don't think that's a good definition at all."

I was a bit surprised, especially after the note about this being a 'general' common understanding, but he was adamant it was wrong. I had the sense he was becoming very defensive, maybe angry even. I gave him space to give his definition, and we all agreed that was good too. And we moved on. After the training, I thought about his reaction, and how alienating the definition must have seemed to him. I realised perhaps he was just frustrated with a constant lack of understanding.

I also reflected on the session as a whole. From the expressions on some faces, I could see that even with the best intentions, attention was often waning as I trawled through the list. I had to change some things for the next session.

"Roll up! Roll up! Pick a number, any number!" It was like I was calling for participants in 'pick-a-box' at the fair. "See what you have won!"

But this game did not actually have any prizes. It had words. It was the participant's job to give their understanding of the particular word that was revealed. I rotated through each person and they said what they thought. Then anyone else could add their bit. Only after all of that, did I add any extra information, only if *absolutely* necessary. I included a few interesting terms, and we all had a bit of a laugh at those. There were common, easy ones, and again, more niche terms that needed some exploring.

"Oh that was so much fun!" one person said. "And it really felt like it expanded my knowledge. I think I am more confident now."

"Yes," said another, "although I knew a lot already, this just tweaked some of the things I didn't know."

### **Story 3: Sharing Empathy**

"Time to do some scenarios," I announced. We had run through all the activities and it was time to put it into practice. I had consciously made the decision to keep the Zoom groups small, so that we could all have a go, and all give feedback.

I began by describing the scenario.

"What if a young student comes to you and asks to talk privately. He looks extremely nervous, looking down a lot and keeps running his fingers through his hair. You take him to a table out on the lawns, not near anyone else. He then reveals that he is gay. What would you say?"

One mature woman responded. "I'd say, I don't care. I don't care if you're gay, straight or a unicorn. It just doesn't matter to me."

I was a bit shocked. Why was I shocked? Was this not a good response? Was this not what we were aiming for? But it was not what was in my mind. This was blunt. This was *uncaring*. I only came out fairly recently, and I knew it was a heart wrenching act of vulnerability. I put myself out there time after time and it was still *difficult*. So when I set up the scenario, I was thinking of a young, vulnerable boy, reaching out. He was clearly struggling, worried about something. Such a flippant response rather riled me up. I was about to respond with something along the lines of "no, no, no, you can't say that!" But I stopped myself.

I had to remember that this was the training, these people may not know how hard it was for this boy. They may not have had anyone vulnerable come out to them before. This lady just did not *know*. I realised that *I* was now the one becoming defensive at *her* lack of understanding. I had



to take a step back and see the bigger picture. It was *my* job to help her understand. I could not just tell her that she was wrong, that would not help. I had to help her see for herself. I had to try and invoke empathy and understanding. I had to start with what she said, and gently bend it around to a more reasonable response. I needed to make her confident as an Ally, so that she could also see the bigger picture of where people may be coming from, and teach her the skills she needed to respond appropriately.

#### **Story 4: How to be an Ally**

“You have all been great! Now it’s time to put it into practice.” I announced the scenarios to the group on Zoom. There were three participants, one lecturer and two mature age students.

“You walk into your classroom and overhear a conversation, and someone says: ‘But he’s still very much a man. I just don’t think he should use the women’s toilets’. You have seen the person she is talking about around the campus – clearly a trans woman. How would you respond?”

One student participant responded, “You can’t say that! That’s transphobic!”

I decided to continue the banter.

“Oh come on, what if there are young girls in there?” I imitate the offender.

“It’s discriminatory, and it’s OFFENSIVE, and it’s WRONG!” The participant was yelling.

“But I don’t think some people would feel safe with him in there” I continued.

“Is this a JOKE! It’s serious! You can’t DISCRIMINATE against a trans person like that!”

I could see the participant was going red, so called time out on the scenario. “Clearly this has evoked some anger,” I said. “I can see why it would, for sure, but do you think it helped the situation?”

The first participant did not respond, and seemed flustered. The staff member spoke, “I am wondering if that person was just misguided. I was thinking about what you said during the training, about trying to understand, and listening to different points of view.”

“That could certainly be true too. We really didn’t know what the context was or what the person understood of the situation.”

“I agree,” the last participant said. “Might be best to think it through rationally, try to see the bigger picture, rather than jumping straight to anger.”

The first participant, who had settled a bit, came back on. “But how do you not get angry?”

“I think it comes with practice,” I responded, “and recognising your own reactions. That’s the role of an Ally, really. To be a mediator and talk through things, ask open ended questions. It can be difficult, but if you think about it, we are an educational institution, so we could try education first. If that doesn’t work, we can be more firm around policy and consequences, but try not to let emotions overwhelm you.”

### **Borderlands: building belonging in uncertainty**

As mentioned above, through critical reflection on my practice, I was able to choose experiences that exemplified borderlands theory. In what follows I will give an overview of borderlands theory and describe how the stories I have told illustrate the key aspects of the theory.

A border can be thought of as any physical or metaphorical boundary between two ‘sides’, concepts or regions that have distinct differences, for example, country borders or academic disciplines. The border itself, however, particularly between concepts, can be incredibly difficult to define (Morse,

Mitcham, Hupcey, & Cerdas, 1996). The overlapping, hybrid, or undefined region has come to be known as a region of its own, a “borderland”, and is even large enough for people to exist within. Borderlands theory developed in the early 1980s as a social theory with “diverse interdisciplinary, political, social, and academic origins” (Naples, 2010, p. 505). A major research application since then has been to examine the experiences of “those dwelling there to negotiate the contradictions and tensions found in diverse cultural, class, and other settings” (Naples, 2010, p. 505) across a wide range of social, cultural, political and educational contexts.

Gloria Anzaldua’s (1987) seminal work *Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza* describes several scenarios where there was an interface between two seemingly opposing sides. First, there was the cultural border between Mexico and the United States, represented by an (imposed) physical border as well as a cultural one. Second, as a self-identified lesbian, she had to negotiate the boundary between the queer world and the rest of the population. Third, as a woman there was a gender divide she also had to navigate. The book is replete with very expressive metaphors about the borderland region, showing how personal, emotional, and demanding existing in a borderland can be. Anzaldua (1987, p. 3) writes that borders are used

to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato (*sic*), the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal”.

Anzaldua’s work explores such terms as “normal” and “belonging”, and work by others on the theory has extended, expanded and contextualised this (Clisby, 2020; Hammad, 2010; Russell, 2021). It relates well to the above definition of belonging by Tice et al. (2021) in that Anzaldua (1987) recognises the need for some level of comfort or value to feel belonging, but that a borderland is “not a comfortable territory to live in” (p. iii). That is, unless you find something that makes you feel part of the community, something familiar “it was the Mexican movies I saw at the drive-in... that gave me a sense of belonging” (p. 60). Therefore there is an impetus to be extra vigilant in promoting belonging for those “who inhabit the borderlands” (p. i).

In addition, a strong theme of a power differential underlies the work, and this is reminiscent of the foundational work by Freire (2018). This sense of the relationship between power and belonging also underscores the importance of describing, defining and theorizing the borderlands themselves, the connotations of existing in a borderlands region and coming to terms with the relationships across and within the borderlands. Understanding the borderlands has allowed me, in this paper, to develop a way to navigate this boundary so as to actively incorporate the pedagogy of ZPD. Here the location of the zone for learning is constantly shifting within this difficult, likely anxiety inducing environment, where the learner may feel uneasy, and the teacher has to be aware of the potential discomfort and impact of any perceived power imbalance. Hence understanding the borderlands (detailed in this section) and incorporating ZPD (detailed in the next section) can improve people’s sense of belonging despite being in a state of uncertainty. As Anzaldua (1987) said, people from the borderlands should “no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need

to make the first overture... apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway” (p. ii).

### ***Belonging as a trainer***

Story 1 revealed that in order for the entire program to be effective, I had to feel a sense of belonging as a trainer. Not only that, as I had only recently come out in the workplace myself, I was at a crossroads, beginning a journey where I had to consider both my identity relating to the LGBTIQ+ community, and the views of the other side: “the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. i). This is particularly difficult for someone who identifies as LGBTIQ+, because unlike cultural identity, we generally do not have a family history from which to feel a sense of connection and belonging. For Anzaldua (1987), this is the experience of being “alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture” (p. 20). One issue with coming out in my workplace was that I was suddenly thrust out of the dominant world, and into the borderlands, because there was no going back into the closet. “‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 48). It was this discomfort, this sense that I was not “normal” that motivated me to move forwards to conduct the training. The old me had to “take that flying leap into the dark [because] if she doesn’t change her ways, she will remain a stone forever” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 49). In this quote I find “stone” such a non-living descriptor, and without feeling alive, how could I ever feel a sense of belonging as my true identity? I had to overcome my reluctance to truly live in order to move forwards and help others.

Moving forwards to find one’s identity is incredibly important for the sense of belonging as a trainer or any form of teacher. Janet Alsup (2006) who discussed teacher identity extensively in the context of borderlands theory, found that “only the teacher who has developed a rich, well-rounded identity, or sense of self, is truly successful in the classroom. An effective teacher must be ‘self actualized’... to the extent that it is possible and reflective about all aspects of his or her self” (p. 109). Of course, this was easier said than done, and there was an enormous impact on me personally. I weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of this in depth in another publication (Mann, 2021) and concluded that it was best for me to come out and live my authentic self. As Alsup points out, however, living authentically is not an easy task because “new teachers [who] were not able to experience or express borderland discourse... felt a great deal of tension and discomfort taking on the role of teacher” (Alsup, 2006, p. 113) and these people often left the profession. In my early days, as in Story 1, I felt the same discomfort in standing up in front of a group of students. While my tension did not disappear, I was, however, able to work through it with the help of a co-presenter, my own ally, so to speak.

By the end of Story 1, I recognised that I had to fully embrace my identity, rather than simply be a trainer as an abstract role devoid of individual connection. As Dall’Alba (2009) said, as professionals, we need to understand that “we are always already embedded in, and entwined with, our world, not simply contained within it” (p. 35). Albeit continually emotionally taxing to put myself in the limelight, I had found my own sense of belonging.

### ***Belonging for Allies from the ‘mainstream’***

Story 1 shows that through the training, I invited others into that borderland region, sometimes people who had little or no knowledge of what the other side looked like, how “messy” the

borderland could be, or how to find their way around. It is extremely important that those from the 'mainstream' come to this understanding, because in the words of Anzaldua (1987), this allows them to meet border dwellers "halfway", ensuring those from the minority do not have to do all of the hard work of "traversing" themselves. As Freire (2018) argues: "Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary" (Ch. 1). Anzaldua (1987) describes this in terms of race, although it applies to any minority: "Many feel that whites should help their own people rid themselves of race hatred and fear first... I think we need to allow whites to be our allies" (p. 85). It is only by inviting the 'mainstream' into the borderlands, that minorities can advocate for real change in the world.

I knew when I initiated the Ally training that I wanted to challenge the heteronormative nature of the world in which many people lived, knowing nothing else. However, I could not force the change, I could not transform others' opinions for them, they had to do that themselves. Dall'Alba (2009) puts it succinctly: "this transformation of the self can be achieved by interrogating what we take for granted about our world and ourselves; by challenging assumptions we make... and have historically made" (p. 37). I was simply the one doing the challenging, just by existing and taking my place as a trainer. Dall'Alba (2009) continues by quoting Plato and it is plain to see the analogy with borderlands theory: "It means removing human beings from the region where they first encounter things and transferring and accustoming them to another realm where beings appear" (p. 37). The "realm" in this case is the borderlands, and the key word for my story is "accustoming" – only with a trainer who knows and continues to feel the emotional turmoil of that "realm" well enough to help others to "accustomise" can the Allies feel a sense of belonging in their roles, despite not actually belonging to the minority group.

### ***Belonging for Allies who exist in the margins***

Story 2, however, demonstrated that the borderland was still a tricky place and I had not necessarily created a safe space within the training environment to give those from the minority side a sense of belonging. This resulted in tension, potentially to the point of hostility. It is possible that people such as the "bear" from story 2 have had previous bad experiences that meant they had a more immediate negative reaction to misunderstanding than someone who may not have dealt with that before. When the topic of conversation, or training, is so personal for some people, it can mean they become defensive more quickly. This can even seem to be irrational to someone who has not existed in the margins themselves, or has not themselves entered the borderlands to try and gain some insight. Anzaldua (1987) points out the emotional labour involved in the minority always having to do the crossing over: "Every time she makes 'sense' of something, she has to 'cross over,' kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her" (p. 49). This highlights what a difficult place the borderlands can be for someone who feels the burden of being different, something I already feel as a trainer, and can empathise with.

Anzaldua and Alsop also both addressed the added mental load that someone who exists in the borderlands has when trying to interact with the "mainstream" side. Anzaldua (1987) said "the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness" (p. 78). Alsop (2006) stated "that professional and personal identities are multiple and ever changing, [and] a teacher's identity is a 'weaving together' (Gee, 1999) of various different subjectivities and

situated identity positions” (p. 113). Problems arise when someone in the borderlands receives “multiple, often opposing messages” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 78) from the world around them. In a seeming contradiction, however, Alsup (2006, p. 111) explains that a useful way to deal with this multiplicitous situation for someone who is to be in a teaching role, such as an Ally, is not to *avoid* the issue, but through even *more* communication:

this merging, this professional identity formation, happens through a new teacher’s participation in various genres of discourse that facilitate a dialogic engagement with students, mentors, teacher educators, family, peers...

Vitaly, this also results in “increased pedagogical effectiveness” (Alsup, 2006, p. 111). Therefore, one of the main aims of the Ally training, or any training to foster inclusion of people who exist in the borderlands, is discussion. In Story 2, I realised that I had to change from ‘sage on the stage’ – information forward style training – to interactive, discussion based training to enable people to feel the tension themselves, understand what the emotional hardship is like and not avoid it, but develop resilience, and therefore help everyone develop their sense of belonging.

Another reason for discussion based training was because I could not possibly represent all experiences and identities. It was important to include the views, identities, and feelings of others. As Gately (2010) stated, in his thesis on borderlands and sexuality, “we must consider that solidarity is contingent upon the oppressed person’s cooperation, otherwise it risks being paternalistic” (p. 80). It cannot be contingent on one person’s authority to develop the participants’ sense of understanding and belonging. That can only come through discussion and individual development.

### ***Belonging for others***

Story 3 illustrated my continued efforts to transform participants into Allies who felt valued, and who could then pay that forward so that those in the community they were there to help would also feel valued.

In the story, when a participant did not respond the way I expected, my gut reaction was to become riled up, to become defensive. Gately (2010) presents a similar situation in his thesis where raw emotion led to a lack of understanding and someone in the minority group became defensive. This is explained because “his experiences over the course of his life have taught him that non-racialized, non-trans, non-feminist colleagues and community members are incapable of developing an analysis that will not damage him in some way. He is wary, and protects himself by wearing a coat of armour” (p. 81). If someone, however, is going to take on the role of an Ally, they must be able to get past this initial visceral reaction to a more rational, cognitive state. Neurologically speaking, if someone is in “fight” mode, there is no place for education. There is a shut down. As an educator, especially a social constructivist educator, I know that certain conditions have to be met for actual learning to happen. Fight or flight (amygdala) responses prevent (prefrontal cortex) reasoning and learning. An Ally must gain the skills to separate themselves from their own immediate reactions and respond as objective and reasoned mediators. This does not necessarily lessen the emotion, but allows someone to work through the experience.

I myself was able to cognitively reason through my own feelings. In part because of my experiences with participants such as the “bear” in Story 2, I knew that reacting emotionally would not help the participant in Story 3 feel like she belonged in the training, nor demonstrate good practice as an Ally. She was doing her best, and I needed to meet her where she was at with my own empathy and

understanding. Then I needed to demonstrate to her a better way to respond to the student in distress, again using empathy.

### **Sharing the belonging**

Finally, Story 4 shows, I regularly employ practices that actively involve the participants in discussions where we can practice the strategies of being an Ally who can meet people where they are at. Although it can take some time for Allies to develop these skills, I do find that these discussions are really effective. I can help participants see the bigger picture, understand human reactions, appreciate what is really going on for people, and therefore be effective in helping them achieve a sense of belonging.

Anzaldua (1987) described the need for a “mediatrix” (p. 30), or a mediator, predominantly between cultures, but also between other human conditions. I have come to firmly believe that “mediator” is the role of the Allies in the context of the university. Anzaldua stated that this mediator requires “the tolerance for ambiguity that... people who cross cultures, by necessity possess” (p. 30). This tolerance is also absolutely critical for Allies.

Although “multiple descriptions of the world” (Barnett, 2012, p. 74) provides a broader ambiguity associated with the human condition, it is intensified in the LGBTQ+ population. Amongst this group, there is such immense difference, an overwhelming number and diversity of identities that often defy absolute definition. Therefore, the simple acquisition of “further knowledge is going to be inadequate” (Barnett, 2012, p. 74). My stories show that if Allies do not jump straight to imposing their own ideas, and can simply ask a person about their own identity, situation, feelings and thoughts, then that is a beneficial way to start a discussion and make the person feel valued and included. Since ambiguity can “leave *la mestiza* floundering in uncharted seas,” Anzaldua (1987, p. 79) suggests that “only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically”. This is an extremely apt metaphor, indicating that Allies need to be able to accommodate all of the different aspects of the borderlands region, despite it being a difficult, and often emotionally tense, domain.

By being flexible, and initiating conversation with open ended questions, Allies can also aim to avoid a defensive reaction, either from themselves or from the people they are supporting. It does require some practice, learning new skills and ways of thinking that may not be familiar, as “*la mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations”. However, if the Ally, as the mediator, can use “divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 79) this will clearly enhance the sense of belonging felt by everyone.

### **ZPD: building belonging through pedagogy**

This project saw myself, as an academic experienced in the notions of constructivism, experiential learning, developmental theories, pedagogical and andragogical theories, undertake a critical analysis of my continued development of the Ally Program in light of the borderlands theoretical framework. In integrating the seemingly disparate parts of my identity, I had one last, but significant epiphany. As Alsup (2006) said, through critical reflection, teachers can identify particular pedagogies that resonate with their own ways of teaching. In this case, I recognised that the Vygotskian pedagogy of the Zone of Proximal Development had become relevant to my training.

Although initially used to describe the psychology of childhood learning, it has since been applied throughout the learning journey, including in adult education and training (Bockarie, 2002; Chaiklin, 2003; Engestrom & Sannino, 2010; Wood & Wood, 1996). As Daniels (2001) stated, “the concept of ZPD was created by Vygotsky as a metaphor to assist in explaining the way in which social and participatory learning takes place” (p. 56). In saying “social”, Daniels is specifically referring to what Vygotsky (1978) said about learning being more effective “under guidance” (p. 86), and not the more general social learning in much other educational literature. The importance of one-to-one guidance is one of the main reasons I found ZPD to be particularly appropriate for the Ally training where much of the interaction is between trainer and learner. Another is that in using ZPD, it is vital to understand the learner’s current level, based on their “historical constructions” (Daniels, 2001, p. 56) though a process of “dynamic assessment” (p. 58). The ally trainer should be competent in this assessment to determine how to progress the learning of the participants. It is also important for the allies in the day-to-day life of the university where they are perhaps helping to change people’s understandings and behaviour. Of most interest to me, however, was the similarity of the “zone” of ZPD to the metaphorical “borderland” occupied by a learner who is between one level of competence and the next (Bockarie, 2002, p. 51). Both ZPD and borderlands theory are capable of dealing with a constantly shifting border, an extremely diverse range of learners, and an ever evolving and complex topic.

### ***Belonging as a trainer***

As a trainer, I not only needed the requisite knowledge, but I also needed to be “self-actualised”. In ZPD, as in many pedagogies, it is important for teachers to have a broad and deep knowledge, to be “experienced professionals [who are] competent in their field” (Bockarie, 2002, p. 51). However, in ZPD more specifically, the teachers also need to be able to self-reflect and not take their position for granted, as they are inherently human and not free of foibles. In order to be able to adapt to the learners, teachers need to first recognise their own beliefs and assumptions, and acknowledge their own situation and their relationship to the borderlands and the people within and on both sides. Similarly, for ZPD to be effective, Daniels (2001) argued that a teacher must also concede the fact that “the meanings and values of the caregiver will canalize and constrain the possibilities for interest and interaction [of the learner]” (p. 63). As a professional in the university context, there is an impetus for me to remain calm despite potentially emotive discussions, not become ‘riled up’ and not insert my own values because the “canalization process may lead to conflict” (p. 63) that can cause the learning to become less effective.

### ***Belonging for Allies, whether from the ‘mainstream’ or at the margins***

The borderlands may be a new and intimidating place where participants in the training may not have much knowledge, may have misconceptions that first need to be dealt with, or may already have a great deal of knowledge. Therefore, the participants’ current situations need to be taken into account. As Daniels (2001) discussed, in ZPD, the content has to be meaningful to the “developmental stage and life situations” of the participants (p. 60), or as Bockarie (2002) put it, “the implementation of successful cognitive apprenticeships relate to the selection of appropriate real-world situations or tasks that are grounded in learner needs” (p. 48). In this case, the existing level of understanding and prior experiences of the participants must be factored into the training.

During the training, I have to “accustomise” people to the borderlands space. As such, it was important for me as an instructor to listen to people’s anxieties and understand this is a complex and

often emotional journey and can cause “psychic restlessness”. In ZPD, the teacher also has to understand what the person already knows and deal with learning anxieties. Bockarie (2002) discussed the comfort of the learner and advised that in employing ZPD, the instructor “must be careful to not take the learners too far outside their comfort level in the development process” (p. 63). In so doing the instructor “allows the newcomer to... participate peripherally... without the threat and anxiety of being asked to take on prematurely assigned tasks and responsibilities” (p. 56). The Ally training was a safe space for the “newcomer” Allies to explore the borderlands before putting the knowledge into practice.

Once I have participants in the training, the key is to challenge them to expand their understanding, moving them on from wherever they are to greater knowledge. I guide people to explore the borderlands, I challenge their assumptions and attempt to move them to a place they have not been before. Similarly, in ZPD, “instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development [and so] impels or awakens a whole series of functions that are in the stage of maturation lying in the zone of proximal development” (Daniels, 2001, p. 58).

In borderlands, I cannot make the change for people; they need to transform themselves, but I am there to facilitate. In ZPD, the zone is created by such facilitation, by the knowledgeable leading the unknowledgeable, through discussion and a “negotiation between the more advanced partner and the learner” (Daniels, 2001, p. 59). Importantly, ZPD is not simply a “‘one-way’ process wherein the ‘scaffolder’ constructs the scaffold alone and presents it for use to the novice” (Daniels, 2001, p. 59). This two-way dialogue is also important because the borderlands is a messy place with “multiple, often opposing messages”. In ZPD it is the teacher’s role to sort out the messages and try to deliver the ones that will be helpful “through the collaborative use of mediational means” (Daniels, 2001, p. 60).

In borderlands, as seen above, it is important that the mediator embrace divergent thinking that may require a wider perspective. The teacher needs the whole perspective, the bigger picture of the entire suite of learning material, content, applications and possibilities, and to be able to draw on all of that knowledge to help the students learn. In his work, Daniels (2001) discussed a series of zones related to ZPD that theorised this process by which the teacher can restructure the learning process dependent upon where the learner is capable of going, not on what is mandated by the syllabus. In both borderlands and ZPD, this may even require moving away from the set curriculum to meet the needs of the actual student and actuate true engagement and learning. In borderlands, the flexibility to encompass all possibilities for the student is akin to the ability to “stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically” to meet the student’s needs.

### ***Belonging for others***

In ZPD, there is eventually a “transfer of responsibility from the tutor to the learner” (Wood & Wood, 1996, p. 2), that is, from myself as the trainer to the Allies becoming teachers themselves. Bockarie (2002) talked about transitioning through the roles of “learning practitioner” (p. 56) to “aspiring expert” (p. 60) eventually to “expert” (p. 60). In ZPD, it is also imperative that “teaching, or instruction, should create the possibilities for development, through [a] kind of active participation... and that it should entail a transfer of control to the learner” (Daniels, 2001, p. 61). That way the Allies become the ones to further discussions with the wider community. ZPD offers some insights into how important it is for the Ally, in taking control, to stay on task and focused, something achieved by remembering the training. Daniels (2001) describes various arguments about



keeping in mind the teacher's "voice" even when the teacher is absent. If an Ally is successful in remembering their training around borderlands theory, they may be more successful in passing the knowledge forwards to promote belonging.

### ***Belonging into the future***

Looking to the future, it is recognised that language is a social construction that "is at one time cultural and historical" (Daniels, 2001, p. 64). In terms of the borderlands, this puts a relativity of time, place and social context on the language used around sexual orientation and gender. As such it is fluid and contextual, and therefore it is vital that the Allies understand and respond to this. Over time and in different contexts, definitions of terminology change, and how people define themselves also changes. Bockarie (2002) points out that Vygotsky himself "understood learning to be a lifelong process within which learners are constantly constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their knowledge base and skills required to function in the world" (p. 50). If an Ally is flexible to such change, they will continue to be effective as guides in the borderlands into an unknown (and unknowable), undoubtedly socially constructed future.

### **Conclusion**

Stories connect people, and connection fosters a sense of belonging. This is especially true for LGBTIQ+ people in the anxiety inducing, uncertain and unpredictable world we all live in, and at a university where we are trying our best to work and learn. By reflecting on stories about my experiences, I was able to demonstrate that certain approaches to the Ally training were essential to enhance belonging; that is, feeling comfortable and valued in the university environment.

My identity and experiences and the way I incorporate them into the program are instrumental to the experiences of everyone who undertakes the training, because the training heavily relies on my personal interaction with those involved. The future of this program, and similar programs that rely on such emotional labour (Crawford et al., 2018; Hebson, Earnshaw, & Marchington, 2007) and personal input from the trainer, hinges on the trainer's ability to self-reflect, interrogate their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, and make changes based on this reflection. Autoethnography legitimises this purposive self-reflection as research. Through the process I have found my place within the borderlands, and yes, I still find it as difficult and anxiety inducing as ever, but through using ZPD as a pedagogy, I can use this as an advantage in my role as a trainer.

Allies come from both sides of the border and the Ally Program creates a place to mix, to come to understanding through interaction. The LGBTIQ+ side of the border is not the side 'to be understood' as an abstract concept. We are people, not concepts. We need to be understood as people, with identities, with feelings. And so goes the other way. The 'straight/cisgender' side of the border is not an abstract 'unknowingness', they are also people. They are people who may not know *yet*. And this is key, because we can help *people* learn. We cannot combat ignorance (discrimination) as an abstract concept. ZPD teaches us that people help one another learn through patience and guidance. This community just happens to exist in a borderlands space. It may be seen as a place of dystopia but again, dystopia is a *human* condition, not an abstract idea. ZPD highlights that learning takes a high level of thoughtful interaction, enough to work around and in spite of tension. Again being able to distinguish thought and knowledge from emotion and impulse is a distinctly *human* capability. Those who 'know' have a more complete view, have become

experienced themselves in navigating the borderlands, and can therefore guide people safely to their next 'zone' of understanding, wherever that is, and despite a constant state of flux.

Thus Allies are *guides* within the university context who can use ZPD principles to help others in the community navigate the otherwise anxiety producing borderland around sexual orientation and gender. In a university, we acknowledge that education is power over adversity. "Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 86). The Ally training seeks to combat ignorance, prejudice and subjugation by bringing people together to achieve sense of belonging despite existing in the borderlands:

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes... The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react (p. 79)

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