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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Belonging through a web of connections in a first-year online course

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University learning, teaching and assessment is experiencing significant digital and pedagogical disruption. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, university teachers have experienced the shift to Emergency Remote Teaching, the increase of hybrid and online learning, and the rise of GenAI. These disruptions, combined with ramifications of neoliberalism and managerialism, have made it more difficult for students and teachers to build relationships and trust, which have always been at the centre of learning and teaching. Renewed research interest in the concept of belonging shows promise for re-building human connection in learning and teaching; however few studies have specifically focussed on belonging in post-pandemic online learning environments, especially within the first-year cohort. This qualitative case study examines one online course including interviews with two teachers and three students, analysis of the course site, and observations of synchronous classes. Findings evidence that the teaching team humanised the online environment and directed academic belonging through place and social belonging by emphasising the learner-instructor relationship to facilitate student belonging.

Keywords: Belonging, relational pedagogies, online learning, higher education, first-year, qualitative

Introduction

The development of authentic, human connections between teachers and students has always been at the core of good learning and teaching (Walker-Gleaves, 2019). Research has consistently shown that quality student-teacher relationships have a positive impact on academic performance (van Herpen et al., 2025), retention (Loes et al., 2024), engagement (Sun et al., 2022) and belonging (Pedler et al., 2022; Thacker et al., 2022), although much of this research draws from on-campus learning.

Despite the importance of student-teacher connections, internal and external pressures on students and teachers have made it more difficult to build relationships between university students and their teachers. Within universities, neoliberal and managerialism agendas have converged with successive waves of pedagogical and technological disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the rise of GenAI. Reduced government funding has forced universities to focus on generating income and driving efficiencies resulting in cost-cutting, increased academic workload, casualisation of academic staff, and global competition for students (Kenny, 2025). Combined with widening participation agendas, this has led to significant change in student demographics, increased enrolments and larger class sizes (Raaper, 2021; Walker-Gleaves, 2019). Other trends such as a decline in class attendance (Lowe et al., 2025) and growth in hybrid and online learning have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Wells Advisory, 2021). All these factors are hindering academics' capacity to create and sustain relationships with their students (Desierto & De Maio, 2020; Walker-Gleaves, 2019). However, some academics are pushing back against neoliberalism and the "student as consumer" mentality to refocus on the student-teacher relationship (Desierto & De Maio, 2020; Dulfer et al., 2025).

In the context of online learning, the student-teacher relationship takes on heightened importance due to the isolation of studying online (Stone & Springer, 2019). Donelan et al. (2025) report that some teachers have adapted their practices and made use of tools such as text chat, reactions, polls and shared whiteboards to connect with their students. Other teachers report that teaching to "black tiles" and the lack of visual feedback cues raises trust issues for them and makes it challenging to teach online and build relationships with students (Williams & Pica-Smith, 2022). Additionally, the rise of GenAI has led to a reciprocal mistrust between students and their teachers (Luo, 2025). This reported loss of trust is important, as trust is fundamental to establishing

relationships between students and teachers, and for students to feel that they belong in online classrooms (Peacock & Cowan, 2019).

At its core, belonging is relational, it is about personal connections between people, the environment and non-human actors (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). Significant institutional and research interest has focused on belonging, due to the reported benefits for student retention, success and well-being (Pedler et al., 2022; van Kessel et al., 2025); however, there remains a paucity of research on belonging in online university environments and how connections are facilitated through online belonging teacher practices (DiGiacomo et al., 2023). Additionally, most of this research has focussed on student perspectives, with the voice of the online teacher being largely absent (Cenkci, 2025). This is problematic, as although student perspectives are important to understand belonging in online classrooms, teachers are central to how belonging is designed and enacted. To contribute to addressing this gap, the guiding research question was: How do Australian university teachers facilitate belonging in a first-year online course? While this study forms part of a larger research project, this paper reports findings from one case study by providing an in-depth, multi-dimensional exploration of belonging praxis in action in a first-year online course. The paper commences with a review of the literature and discussion of the theoretical framework, followed by an overview of the methodology, results, and concludes with a discussion of the findings.

Literature review

Belonging

Belonging is a complex psychosocial construct that has both psychological and sociological dimensions (Ajjawi et al., 2025; Pedler et al., 2022). Research indicates that belonging is context specific, fleeting, and changes from interaction to interaction (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018). Belonging is subjective and relates to how a person "feels" at a particular time and place and that they matter to a specific person or group within that context (Strayhorn, 2018). Scholars report that belonging is unique to an individual, being experienced differently based on a person's gender, race and income status, and the intersectionality of these multiple identities (Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2023).

Unsurprisingly, due to its links to the wicked problems of student success, retention and well-being, which universities have been grappling with for decades, the dominant narrative in the literature and within higher education is that belonging is universally positive (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). However, scholars such as Thomas (2015) and Guyotte et al. (2021) are beginning to challenge this, by asking questions about who belongs in higher education and "what are we wanting them to belong to and why?" (Guyotte et al., 2021, p. 556). Belonging research has also started to raise awareness of the structural barriers that exist within universities that make it more difficult for some students to feel that they belong, and to consider students who make a deliberate decision not to belong. Further questions are being asked about what belonging looks like in online and hybrid university environments in a post-digital world (Gravett, 2025).

Belonging online

Online belonging research has largely focussed on students' perspectives of belonging in online learning environments and their teachers' practices that support or hinder student belonging (Adlington et al., 2024; DiGiacomo et al., 2023; Dulfer et al., 2025). This research reveals a synergistic relationship between belonging online and three related concepts: humanising online learning (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020), pedagogies of care (Noddings, 1995), and relational pedagogies (Gravett et al., 2024). In the context of this study, belonging online is examined through the lens of humanising the online environment. Within the literature, there are multiple framings of the humanising online learning construct, which is defined in this study as "the action of creating an environment that is people focussed" (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2005, p. 36). Essentially, it is an approach that returns the student-teacher relationship to the centre of learning and teaching (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020) with technology used as a mechanism for "enhancing rather than replacing human connection" (Mills, 2025, p. 67).

Most of the research on humanising online learning has been influenced by the work of Freire et al. (2014) and is strongly aligned to culturally responsive teaching (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). It involves taking a critical lens to online teaching practices, to recognise that online spaces are not neutral, to dismantle practices that perpetuate inequality, and to actively work to reduce the distance and positional power imbalances between students and teachers (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). Importantly, it involves leveraging and valuing students' prior knowledge, culture and life experiences.

More broadly, the literature discusses humanising of online learning as opportunities to develop relationships with students by being human and projecting ourselves as a "real" person. This means letting our guard down and being vulnerable, revealing glimpses of who the teacher is, being truly present, being interested in students, displaying care, building trust, and showing empathy and compassion.

In summary, belonging is a complex, theoretically messy concept, it is an experience that is deeply personal and unique to the individual. Belonging calls for online teachers to pay attention to the affective aspects of learning, not just the cognitive aspects, by drawing upon the practices of humanising, care and relationships.

Theoretical framework

It was necessary to construct a theoretical framework that combines a belonging framework with an online learning interaction framework to guide the analysis of data, because existing belonging frameworks are broad and do not examine belonging at the online classroom interaction level. Elements of Ahn and Davis's (2020) Domains of Belonging, Moore's (1989) Three Types of Interaction and Hillman's (1994) Learner-Interface were combined and defined as shown below in Table 1. In the context of this study, the definitions of learner-content and learner-interface were updated to reflect contemporary online learning and to align with the Domains of Belonging.

Table 1.
Theoretical framework

Belonging types	**Online interactions**	
Ahn and Davis's Domains of Belonging (2020)	Moore's Three Types of Interaction (1989) and Hillman et al.'s Learner-Interface Interaction (1994)	
Place belonging	Learner-Interface	Learner interactions and use of technologies to facilitate learning and connections to the learning environment.
Social belonging	Learner-Learner-Instructor	Interactions facilitated by the teacher or learners to build connections between learners, and between learners and their teachers for academic, social or support purposes.
Academic belonging	Learner-Content	Interactions designed by teachers to facilitate connection to the content, encourage intellectual engagement, provide academic support and build academic confidence.

Ahn and Davis (2020) identified four Domains of Belonging: social, academic, surroundings (place) and personal space (intrapersonal). Social belonging is the relational aspect of belonging developed by interpersonal connections that students make with their teachers and peers. Academic belonging relates to student feelings of their academic competence, confidence, and alignment to their future career (Kahu et al., 2022; Rueda & Swift, 2023). Surroundings (place belonging) are the physical and digital places that students inhabit, that make them feel welcome, comfortable and safe. In the context of online learning, place belonging is experienced through digital tools such as learning management systems, web conferencing software and communication channels. Personal space (intrapersonal belonging) relates to students' internal feelings such as their identity, life satisfaction and interests (Ahn & Davis, 2020). As this study is focussed on teacher practices, personal space was not examined.

Moore's (1989) Three Types of Interaction was selected as it is a seminal framework used extensively in distance education and online learning research. It enables a focus on interaction at the online classroom level and examines both the relational and academic aspects of learning associated with belonging. Moore posited that to reduce the psychological and communications gap between students and teacher in distance education

environments, three types of interaction are necessary: learner-learner, learner-instructor and learner-content. Hillman et al. (1994) extended Moore's work to include a fourth interaction: learner-interface.

Methodology

This exploratory qualitative research used an instrumental case study design to investigate how an Australian university teacher facilitates belonging in a first-year online course. This design was selected because the researchers were interested in both particularisation; that is, studying a specific example of practice (Stake, 1995), and developing a more holistic understanding of the design and facilitation of belonging practices in a first-year online course. Human Ethics approval 2021/903 was granted from Griffith University for this study.

The Information Technology course that is the basis of this study was offered in both on-campus and online modes with a total enrolment of 541. Only the online component of the course, which had an enrolment of 102, was investigated in this research. The course used a flipped approach, with one course site and one Teams site used as a shared space for both on-campus and online students. Each week, students viewed a series of short videos and completed practice quizzes prior to attending a two-hour optional online consolidation lecture. The lecture was facilitated live by the coordinator and used a low level of formality, akin to a fire-side chat. Typically, the coordinator would spend the first 20 – 30 minutes reviewing the most salient points from the pre-recorded videos, with the remainder of the class being open to student Q&A. Due to the large class size, student communication with the teacher occurred through either public or private chat within Zoom. A recording of the consolidation lecture was posted in the course site, so it was accessible to all students. On-campus students were invited to attend the optional online consolidation lecture with the online students. Online tutorials were not recorded due to the interactive nature of the class and the teaching team wanting to encourage attendance. At the end of the week, the solutions to the tutorial exercises were made available on the course site.

This study involved a course coordinator, tutor and three students. Tom is the coordinator and has been teaching first-year students for more than 22 years. He has been involved in the design of online courses at several institutions prior to COVID-19. In addition to coordinating the unit, he facilitates the online consolidation lecture each week. Jane is a sessional tutor who works in industry, with six years of teaching experience. She facilitates one of the four online tutorials. Omar, Lily and Samuel are three students who are studying the course in fully online mode. Pseudonyms have been used to assure participant anonymity.

Multiple data collection methods were used including a pre and post coordinator interview, tutor interview, course site analysis including the Teams site, observation of four class recordings across the semester, and student interviews. The trustworthiness of the findings is strengthened by the triangulation of data across multiple data sources (Cohen et al., 2018). The sequencing of data collection was a deliberate decision to maximise the opportunity to learn about teacher design and facilitation practices, with each data collection phase informing the subsequent data collection. This provided a rich, holistic, multi-dimensional perspective on how belonging is designed and facilitated in a first-year online course.

All interviews and recordings of consolidation lectures were transcribed verbatim using Otter® and checked for accuracy. Transcripts and screenshots with annotations of the course site and Teams channel were imported into Nvivo® 15. Detailed analysis of the data commenced after data collection was completed. An abductive approach to coding was used, commencing with a small number of a priori codes identified from the theoretical framework. Miles and Huberman's (2014) concurrent qualitative data analysis strategy was used, involving three iterative processes of data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The three categories of belonging are explored in the findings: place, social and academic belonging.

Results

Place belonging: Learner-interface

The place for online learning is constructed using a range of digital technologies including Canvas, Teams and Zoom. Tom, the unit coordinator, invites students into and orientates them to the place of learning using a

"relentless welcome" (Felten & Lambert, 2020). The course site analysis shows that prior to the commencement of classes, a welcome announcement is emailed to students, a welcome video is posted in Canvas and each tutor posts a personalised welcome message to their online tutorial group in Teams. Tom also discussed a welcoming gesture he used in his first online class to establish a connection with students:

> Welcome to [Institution], if this is the first week of your program, thank you for choosing [Institution]. I think you've done a really clever thing […] not only did I come to [Institution] but all three of my children came to [Institution] and they've got through, so it can't be too bad. (Tom interview, Week 1 class observation)

Tom explained that he used this gesture because many first-year students experience stress and anxiety, and he is trying to lower the stress levels by his use of informal language and humour. This welcoming gesture builds student confidence in their decision to enrol and feel part of the university as well as demonstrating how Tom builds learner-instructor connection by showing empathy, using self-disclosure and shared experiences. By these actions, Tom is prioritising the relationship over the content. Being accepted in a place and feeling valued by teachers strengthens students' sense of belonging.

Tom also explained the importance of setting expectations:

> I think it's really important in any course that the expectations are clearly stated. So, in any good relationship, any good communication, knowing what the expectations are is an important point from where you're operating. I try to think that if I'm a student starting a new course, that's what I want to know straight away - what are your expectations? So, I tell them. (Tom interview)

These expectations provided in the course site relate to student professionalism and academic aspects of learning, which are reinforced in classes during the semester. This practice aims to develop students' feelings of safety and comfort in the place of learning by showing that the teaching team is being open, honest and transparent in communicating their expectations of students. This helps to build trust by giving students certainty about how to behave and their academic responsibility as adult learners in a university environment. Knowing "the rules of the game" and building a connection to their future self as IT professionals also contributes to students' academic belonging. Importantly, expectations not only focus on the students but also indicate what students can expect from the teaching team. This strategy is used to lower the power imbalance between the teacher and students, and opens the possibility for a stronger learner-instructor relationship.

In summary, the learner-interface assemblage of technologies constitutes the place where learning occurs and establishes the classroom climate to facilitate place belonging. Academic and social belonging are also connected to place through a welcoming, comfortable, and safe learning environment.

Social belonging: Learner-learner-instructor

In building a learner-instructor connection, Tom indicated that his focus at the start of semester was to make students comfortable interacting with him, as illustrated in this excerpt:

> My approach in week one and two is to try and get them to be comfortable with me and to know that they can ask any question and the question will be treated with respect, my answer will be respectful. [...] Even the way I talk is respectful and inclusive. I don't raise my voice, I'm not trying to make it a strain to listen, but I'm talking to them in a very personable tone. I'm trying to talk to them as if I'm sitting at the table with them each individually. (Tom interview)

Here, Tom is trying to develop an authentic connection with students to build their trust in him and to demonstrate that he is approachable, so they will be comfortable in seeking help from him. In his interview, it was clear that Tom is empathetic to the anxiety that first-year students often feel when they commence their studies. Observations of his classes showed his calm, relaxed and informal demeanour is an attempt to humanise and de-stress the environment by slowing things down and creating a positive classroom climate.

Opportunities for informal conversations with students outside of the official class are just as important to build learner-instructor connection in online classes as in on-campus classes. “I'm normally online five minutes before class, and whoever arrives first, I’m asking, how’s your day going? Just trying to get a conversation going” (Tom Interview). His rationale is that he wants other students arriving at the online class to see the informal conversations that he is having, to make the environment more welcoming, and to see he is approachable. In effect, he is trying to model the behaviour that he wants to see in his online class.

Another strategy that has been used to humanise the online classroom is the use of names. All teachers made it explicit that they should be addressed by their first name. This reinforced the approachability of the teachers and reduced the power imbalance between student and teacher. Jane (tutor) shared how she tries to get to know students on a name basis and requests a WAV file for names she has difficulty pronouncing so she can practice them. Jane also discussed how she builds a rapport with students:

> So, really taking an interest in them. It’s treating people like human beings, understanding their world, and as they come along and interact, knowing one fact about them, and then asking about it. That to me is connection, you’re not just a student number, you’re an actual individual person with a life and a story, and that interests me enough to remember it. (Jane interview)

Through these actions, Jane is demonstrating to students that they are accepted for who they are, valued and respected. This is important for building learner-instructor connections that support a sense of belonging.

Online classes used the chat feature of Zoom as a mechanism for supporting learner-learner connection. Class observations showed that Tom used questions as a device to get students to interact with him, each other and the content. He explained that the learner-learner interaction in the synchronous chat was the only indicator that made him confident that students were connecting with each other and had a sense of belonging. “Whether it’s a question I’ve asked, and a student has given an answer, and another student’s given a different answer, and then another student’s made some comment about one of the other answers” (Tom interview).

The chat feature of Teams was used to facilitate asynchronous learner-learner-instructor connections. Tom heavily promoted it during the consolidation lectures as the place to ask questions outside of scheduled classes (Observations Week 1, 2, 6 and 13). The Teams site analysis showed that students and tutors were active in the space, with conversations aligned to Tom’s intended purpose, reflecting help-seeking and course related questions. Learner-learner connections were facilitated by students responding to questions from other students, the sharing of links and assessment information, and use of immediacy behaviours such as tagging others in responses, use of emojis, and informal language and greetings. These contribute towards reducing the psychological gap between students by creating warmth and friendliness in the online classroom. Interestingly, Samuel and Lily (students) reported that they did not engage in the Teams site. Samuel used Teams for work and the last thing he wanted was to use it for study. Lily indicated that because Teams is not integrated into Canvas, this made it difficult for her to engage. This highlights that although the intention was to use an asynchronous channel for student questions and peer communication, the selection of the technology has the potential to alienate or exclude some students and thwart learner-learner connection and belonging. Use of both Zoom and Teams, performing similar functions, may potentially confuse students.

Samuel discussed the importance and value of student-initiated spaces, where he was invited by a peer to a group during an early Zoom tutorial:

> This whole world kind of opened up and I’ve made all these friends in this online chat group…so, we might have a Facebook group, or maybe it’s a Discord channel, where students studying the same course, at the same time, we can all chat to each other, we can get to know each other. So that's where I’ve found that sense of belonging. (Samuel interview)

When asked what was different to the Teams site compared to Facebook and Discord, Samuel replied that “they are more casual and less business-like” (Samuel interview).

In summary, humanising strategies have been used as a mediator to build learner-instructor connections. These strategies aim to build trust and care through creating a calm, relaxed learning environment and prioritising the relationship with students ahead of content. Additionally, these findings illustrate that student sources of belonging in online environments are unique to the individual. It appears that learner-learner connection is facilitated or hindered through the choice of technology, and that content acts as a mediator or bridge for facilitating learner-learner-instructor connections. Student initiated digital communities can be a valuable source of connection and social belonging for online students.

Academic belonging: Learner-content

Building students' academic confidence is important, particularly for under-represented first-year students. Tom described how the nature of the course content is quite challenging, and that he tries to build learner-content connection by drawing upon the life experiences of students. He also makes a point of explaining why they are learning the content and why it is important. This builds students' academic confidence and a connection to their future career. Jane also discussed how she builds students' confidence:

> I tell them that I don't have all the answers. I'm not the smartest person in the room. If someone has a question, I always say, hey, does anyone else have the answer to that? Who knows what that would be? They normally answer it themselves. I find that that also stimulates a lot of sense of belonging, a sense of, hey, we're here to help each other. (Jane interview)

Here, Jane is trying to position herself as a co-learner and reducing the power distance between her and her students by showing her emotional vulnerability while trying to build students' confidence. These actions work to build a sense of camaraderie and community that "we are all in this together." This strengthens learner-learner, learner-instructor connection and builds students' academic confidence.

When students feel supported, academic confidence and academic belonging are strengthened, and the likelihood of imposter syndrome is reduced. In his messaging to students, Tom is trying to normalise help-seeking behaviours by continually reinforcing all sources of help that are available to students:

> Tutors are people that I know like to help students and that's one of the reasons why they're tutors…I hope that you find your tutor to be a person that you can relate to, that you're comfortable asking questions, and of course, if you're not comfortable asking questions face-to-face, you can always use MS Teams. (Week 1 class observation)

All three students discussed how they felt well-supported as online students, because teachers were accessible and available for help and support. This is a typical comment: "I definitely feel like, even as an online student, that I've been given a lot of privileges and access to help anytime that I need it" (Omar interview).

In summary, the teaching team are trying to build students' academic confidence by building a culture of support, showing them that they can be successful in the online course.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore how Australian university teachers facilitate belonging in a first-year online course. The findings revealed that teachers built a web of connections to support students' sense of belonging. This included the teacher connecting students to digital places, peers, content and themselves. These connections combine to shape students' intrapersonal belonging by contributing to the development of their identity as a student (Tang et al., 2023). In this study, place belonging was distributed across a series of technologies. These online places for belonging acted as containers within which the different types of belonging and interactions occurred. Strategies used by teachers often supported more than one type of belonging, which may indicate that different types of belonging in the online classroom are not siloed but are intertwined, reinforcing the complexity of belonging. This contrasts with Ahn and Davis (2020) whose study focussed on on-campus belonging and reported social, academic, surroundings and personal space to be independent constructs. This aspect of belonging online is worthy of further exploration.

The most dominant interaction observed in this course for building belonging was learner-instructor interaction, which is consistent with Thacker et al. (2022) who reported that 62% of undergraduate students developed their social belonging through connections with their teacher. Interestingly, teachers in this study focussed on developing the learner-instructor relationship to build student belonging. This contrasts with Peacock and Cowan (2019) who asserted that a sense of belonging is needed to build relationships. The learner-instructor relationship was strongly teacher-led, requiring significant thought, effort and action by teachers to devise ways of engaging with students who they did not know and could not see. The design and facilitation of this course intentionally and purposefully had a strong teacher presence and created multiple ways, times and places for students to establish a connection with their teacher. This included welcome messages, welcome videos, arriving early for classes, use of synchronous chat, tutorials, consolidation lecture, email and Teams.

The learner-instructor interaction was used as a pathway to build students' academic belonging by teachers making links to students' existing knowledge, providing multiple forms of academic support and using strategies to build students' academic confidence. Gravett and Winstone (2022) report that some students find it scary and are uncertain about whether they can talk to their lecturers due to the power imbalance between students and teachers. In this study, teachers worked hard to reduce the traditional hierarchical relationship between students and teachers, and to portray themselves as relatable, approachable and "real" people. The learner-instructor relationship facilitated academic belonging by encouraging students to be proactive in communicating with their teachers and seeking help when required.

This research showed that teachers used humanising strategies, including learning student names, treating them as individuals, each with their own story, and contributing towards students feeling valued and respected (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). Hammond and Jackson (2015) suggest that teachers showing care is foundational to building trust on which positive learner-instructor relationships can be developed. Trust was further enhanced when teachers were their authentic selves by being open, honest, transparent, humorous, vulnerable and using self-disclosure to make themselves more approachable and human. Adlington et al. (2024), in their study of online students, reported that the helpfulness, transparency, care, patience and approachability of teachers supported students to develop a sense of social belonging. This suggests that placing the relationship between student and teacher at the centre of learning is essential for humanising and facilitating belonging in online learning environments (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

In the design of this online course, less emphasis was placed by the teaching team on creating places for learner-learner connection. Conversations between students in synchronous and asynchronous environments tended to be transactional rather than social, and centred around course content, assessment and help seeking. In the absence of a social place, students who valued learner-learner social connection chose their own private platforms to facilitate connection with like-minded peers as a mechanism for social and academic support. This highlights the importance of student agency in determining whether students want a social place for learner-learner connections and their preference for whether this is established within the learning environment or as an external student-organised place on their preferred platform.

This study found that content played an important role in this course, and appeared to mediate or act as a bridge for learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions to facilitate social belonging. Xiao (2017) asserts that "interaction with content is inextricably interwoven with learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions in on-campus environments" (p. 124), which appears to also apply to online learning environments. It reinforces the importance of teachers considering both the social and cognitive dimensions when designing online learning (Hodges et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the contribution and importance of this study is threefold. Firstly, it amplifies the voices of first-year, post-pandemic online teachers, who have largely been absent from the online belonging literature. It examines how and importantly why they incorporate specific practices into their online learning classroom in the pursuit of student belonging. Secondly, it indicates that place belonging acts as the overarching environmental context within which social belonging (learner-learner-instructor) and academic belonging (learner-content) are intertwined. Future research should explore whether these findings are prevalent in

other first-year online courses. Finally, this study constructed a framework for analysing online belonging classroom practices by bringing together the different types of belonging with online interactions.

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