Towards ‘Authentic Belonging’: Exploring the Concept and Enhancing Practice

Dr Christine Haddow & Dr Jackie Brodie

Edinburgh Napier UNIVERSITY
Defining Community and Belonging

• Belonging has been defined as…
  • a “dynamic, relational and nonlinear process” (Raaper, 2021, p. 593)
  • a process of learning ‘to be’ (Groves & O’Shea, 2019)
  • a series of support needs to be met through interactions (Strayhorn, 2012)
  • See: Tinto’s (1993) integration model

• Community: “the most essential elements of community are spirit, trust, mutual interdependence among members, connectedness, interactivity, shared values and beliefs, and common expectation.” (Rovai & Wighting, 2005, p. 101).

• Do we need to reframe these concepts? (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022)
The Challenge of Community and Belonging

- Enhancing belonging and community in HE has emerged as an area of thematic priority (Campbell, 2019; Gopalan et al., 2021).
  - At institutional level
  - At sector level (e.g. Advance HE, QAA Scotland)
  - In research/SOLT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Overall Satisfaction</th>
<th>Q21: Part of a community of staff and students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Belonging and the COVID-19 Pandemic

• Distance learners may not always value a sense of belonging. (Brodie & Osowska, 2021)

• Significant challenges to student wellbeing in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the rapid shift to online learning (Nurunnabi et al., 2020; Scoulas, 2021)

• Belonging as a ‘solution’? (Knight et al., 2021; Gopalan et al., 2021)

• “As the post-pandemic academic world rebuilds itself, we will need to get serious about communicating diversity, inclusion and belonging” (Passantino, 2021, p.583).

Image Source: https://leverageedu.com/blog/online-learning/
Edinburgh Napier’s Approach to Belonging Enhancement

• QAA Enhancement Themes ‘Evidence for Enhancement’ (2017-2020) as a catalyst to explore and innovate.

• Suite of funded ‘mini projects’.

• Evaluated through semi-structured interviews with project leads in 2020.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A*</td>
<td>Languages Magazine</td>
<td>H*</td>
<td>Belonging in Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B†</td>
<td>Student Societies Video</td>
<td>I*</td>
<td>SEM Law Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C*</td>
<td>Film Club</td>
<td>J*</td>
<td>Feedback Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D*</td>
<td>Belonging Online</td>
<td>K†</td>
<td>Feedback Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E*</td>
<td>Design Studio Redesign</td>
<td>L*</td>
<td>Improvisation in Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F*</td>
<td>Design Reading Room</td>
<td>M*</td>
<td>Lab Stars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G*</td>
<td>Men into Nursing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Staff † Student
What Works in Enhancing Community and Belonging?

**Student Ownership**
“Students have really taken to the idea of ‘owning’ the space and have been collecting and donating their own resources.” (Design Reading Room Evaluation Form)

**Staff Facilitation**
“It’s a kind of gardening process... it’s about creating the right environment for that community to flourish.” (F, Staff)

**Small Scale Development**
“That is why the small-scale things probably work. Because they are the possible, you don’t try and over cook it.” (Staff, J)
Authenticity

• Authentic learning: “to align university teaching and learning more substantially with the way learning is achieved in real-life settings” (Herrington & Herrington, 2006, p. 3).

• Authentic relational pedagogies (Gravett & Winstone, 2022)

• A ‘one size fits all’ approach to belonging can be tokenistic and homogenising (Graham & Moir, 2022)

“I don’t think you can artificially make a community, like a wee greenhouse pot plant... it needs to be something that you believe in and the students believe in, and they see as a genuine group and a genuine relationship that actually has meaning.” (L, Staff)
Towards ‘Authentic Belonging’

Haddow & Brodie (2023)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Student Ownership</strong></th>
<th><strong>Staff Facilitation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Small Scale Development</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consult with Students</strong>&lt;br&gt;Hold focus groups, workshops or coffee chats to gain a better understanding of the belonging needs of your student cohort.</td>
<td><strong>Support, Don’t Lead!</strong>&lt;br&gt;Allow students to drive the direction of innovations. Avoid imposing your view or experience of communities on them.</td>
<td><strong>Start Small</strong>&lt;br&gt;Begin by establishing an enhancement project with minimal resource and time requirements, then explore how it could be expanded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bring Students Together</strong>&lt;br&gt;When planning innovations, encourage students to form committees, identify tasks and delegate roles to drive the project forward.</td>
<td><strong>Identify Opportunities</strong>&lt;br&gt;Think about when students come together in your curriculum, and how activities can be implemented to build community at these points.</td>
<td><strong>Funding and Resources</strong>&lt;br&gt;Identify funding opportunities to support your enhancement activities, capitalise on small pots of money available within your institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empower students</strong>&lt;br&gt;Support students to make decisions about their communities, e.g. where and when they meet, the activities they involve.</td>
<td><strong>Get the Word Out</strong>&lt;br&gt;Support students’ community development activities by publicising them via course mailing lists, social media pages, and blogs.</td>
<td><strong>Plan Timings Carefully</strong>&lt;br&gt;Factor in the rhythm of the academic year, and the availability of students across this, when setting out timescales for innovations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inspire Collaboration</strong>&lt;br&gt;Suggest that students reach out to other cohorts, e.g. student societies, other programmes, to expand their communities.</td>
<td><strong>Share Practice</strong>&lt;br&gt;Draw on existing research and share examples of belonging enhancement with students and colleagues. Allow them to see what can be done.</td>
<td><strong>Evaluate</strong>&lt;br&gt;Take time to evaluate any initiatives you put in place. Collect student feedback and share the findings with the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Haddow & Brodie (Forthcoming)
References