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## How can a 'Sense of Belonging' inform your teaching strategy? Reflections from a core Business unit. A Practice Report\*

Elizabeth Levin, Andrew Rixon and Maree Keating

Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

### Abstract

*This paper reflects on how a 'sense of belonging' is cultivated for both the teaching team and the students in a large, core first year Business unit. In the Innovative Business Practice (IBP) unit students develop their personal brand and professional identity through strength-based science, and also pitch creative solutions to social problems. This cross-disciplinary unit is taught using an activity-based approach. The team of tutors are being trained as facilitators which creates a sense of belonging and community within the teaching team. A blended delivery approach utilising Crowdicity, idea management software, facilitates networked learning, and helps students develop their digital skills as well as interact with one another, the teaching team and industry experts.*

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## Background

Designing and delivering an innovative unit in a large degree is complex and challenging. At times it is easiest just to go with the flow and deliver a standard unit, rather than challenging norms and conventions. This paper relates part of the journey of the development of a large core first-year unit through which the teaching team has leveraged a 'sense of belonging' approach in its teaching philosophy. This paper considers the 'sense of belonging' from dual perspectives; that of the student, and that of the members of the teaching team. As far back as 1943, Maslow identified 'belonging' as a basic human need which has been argued to be even more fundamental with the 'belonging hypothesis' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Building from Tinto (1997) who showed that a sense of belonging impacts student retention, a large volume of research has developed over the last 25 years. The teaching team have adopted Strayhorn's (2012) definition of a sense of belonging as "a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behaviour" (p. 17). Despite the large literature base developing around a sense of belonging, with research demonstrating important interventions such as acknowledging 'belonging uncertainty' (Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018) and even policy calls for a sense of belonging to be considered a mindset for students to be developed (Rattan, Savani, Chugh, & Dweck, 2015), little has been written about how it can be used as a teaching philosophy in itself.

A critical role of higher education is the development of transferable and non-discipline specific skills (i.e. generic/soft/employability skills) applicable in personal and professional contexts, so graduates are prepared for the VUCA World<sup>1</sup> (which is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous). In order to be able to succeed and grow through higher education

students need to have the opportunity meet and interact with peers, as well as teaching staff, and feel they are part of the learning community, as learning is a social activity. Student sense of belonging to class communities is agreed to be an important predictor of student academic success and indeed is important in first-year units (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). With these goals in mind, the intention was to design a core unit within the Bachelor of Business at Swinburne University of Technology which affords students the opportunity to settle into university; engage with other students in the learning process; develop an understanding of the higher education learning environment; begin to identify their personal identity and brand; develop a sense of belonging, whilst strengthening soft/employability skills. Through this experience, students develop a personal plan in preparation for life beyond the university.

The unit panel for Innovative Business Practice (IBP) set out to develop a unit which epitomises the intentions mentioned above, to effectively equip students with skills and capabilities that will set them up to succeed in their studies and beyond. The aim was to develop social, as well as academic systems, to facilitate learning and encourage engagement so that students could become part of a learning community whilst developing collaborative learning strategies through active learning which has been shown to influence learning, persistence and belonging (Braxton, Milem, & Shaw, 2000; Chanda-Gool & Mamas, 2017).

## The unit - Innovative Business Practice

The curriculum and pedagogy for the IBP unit of study are inextricably linked and were overtly concurrently developed. The mission of the unit is for *students to be able to learn key*

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<sup>1</sup> VUCA is a concept that originated in the U.S. Army to describe the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of the multilateral global landscape after the end of the Cold War (Kinsinger & Walch, 2012).

*communication and teamwork skills that will help them to excel not only in their university studies but also in their current and future work endeavours.* IBP is a multi-disciplinary unit drawing on the fields of psychology, management and entrepreneurship. It helps students develop communication and teamwork skills, whilst working on developing innovative business solutions that can make a social impact. There are two core narratives running through IBP; an introduction to strengths-based science, and business creation for social impact.

Digital skills have become an essential part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skill-set with the Foundation for Young Australians (2015) predicting that employees of the future will need to interact with machines much more frequently and deeper than ever before. In order to develop students' digital literacy IBP is now delivered via a blended teaching model which includes a one-hour lecture, one-hour tutorial and one hour of online content weekly, with the expectation that students are engaged in the learning process for about 12 hours each week. The unit is challenging for students, as there seems to be little content or theory in the unit, as the focus is on students' self-development and the development of their soft skills, more particularly communication and collaboration. Many students expect to learn content and knowledge, and to apply these. This unit is experiential and designed to assist students to think innovatively and creatively, whilst reflecting on themselves and how they can develop their professional brand and personal identity, and pitch this to the world, whilst working collaboratively.

### **Sense of belonging - the teaching team**

With between 350 and 550 students enrolled in each semester there is need for a large teaching team. For many tutors teaching this unit is demanding because the unit is designed to be

activity-driven and requires tutors to be facilitators, working with the students in a relational manner to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Therefore, regular teaching panel meetings, or 'train the trainer' sessions are conducted to prepare tutors and to enculturate them into the sense of belonging philosophy of the unit in order to optimise the learning experience and outcomes for the students. The tutor training focusses on facilitation skills as well as training the tutors to assist students to develop effective group work strategies. Through the tutor training programs tutors develop:

- better understanding of how to facilitate group work and group activities;
- better understanding and increased awareness of choices they make when facilitating groups and the impacts of these choices have on individuals from different cultures and backgrounds; and
- insights into how facilitation skills impact students' sense of belonging in the classroom (Rovai, 2002).

The training sessions have been well attended and acknowledged as being productive and useful, resulting in a stable teaching team, who feel supported and enjoy being part of a teaching panel. Furthermore, since the tutors have actively engaged in the training process, this has generally transferred to the virtual and face-to-face teaching settings. Tutors have the opportunity to get to know the students through their interactions, and many students develop the confidence to express themselves, participate in the various activities, and share their thoughts and opinions. As tutorials are predominantly activity-based, with tutors acting as facilitators, tutors have the opportunity to spend time with each student, who work on tasks within a team throughout the semester. This also provides students with the chance to identify any group work issues in

a timely manner, so effective strategies can be developed to address emerging problems.

## Networked learning

The online content is delivered through two platforms, the learning management system (LMS), which to-date has been Blackboard and Crowdicit. Crowdicity is an ideas management platform with features similar to Facebook, through which participants can post, comment on posts, like posts and vote. The rationale for incorporating Crowdicity was to further embed connectivity, develop digital literacy and students' sense of belonging in order to facilitate networked learning. Networked learning involves the purposeful making of connections between learners, academics, learning materials and the learning community, facilitated by information and communication technology (ICT) (Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, & McConnell, 2004) whilst acknowledging the diverse contexts, social systems and experiences of the learners. Networked learning is predicated on the pedagogical belief that learning occurs through active engagement with the content as well as collaboration and dialogue with peers, educators and other stakeholders, so that individuals can learn from the experiences of the collective.

The incorporation of Crowdicity has evolved over time through trial, feedback and reflection. Activities using Crowdicity have now been purposefully and seamlessly integrated into the curriculum and linked to assessment through a series of challenges. As the unit is based on positive psychology, the first main task for students is to present their personal strengths via a one-minute video which they upload to Crowdicity. In the first weeks of semester students post their videos showcasing their personal strengths, as it is important for students to be able to identify and articulate their strengths as they develop their professional identity. In Semester Two, 2018, 549 students were enrolled. Of these, 450

students posted their strengths and an associated video (which carried no marks but acts to scaffold the first assessable task). Over 25,000 'likes' were recorded and over 2,600 comments posted. The next Crowdicity challenge involves identifying a social entrepreneur who inspires the student. Again, this challenge was not assessed but the activity is aligned with the first assessment task. Ninety-nine students posted, with 4,789 likes and over 400 comments posted.

A further Crowdicity challenge, the 'Social Problem Jam', involves teams of students identifying a social issue of importance to them, on which students then comment and vote. The most popular social issues then became the problems that teams need to pose innovative solutions to, and pitch both virtually as well as in class. These pitches are uploaded to Crowdicity and a large industry panel is recruited to provide feedback online on the pitches. In Semester Two, 2018 the industry panel was comprised of 30 members, who provided feedback on the 74 solutions pitched. Tutors selected the 'best of the best' pitches, which were then presented in the final lecture of the semester, the Industry Networking event, in front of industry panel members as well as peers.

## Feedback from students

Feedback on the unit is collected from students in various ways including via student feedback surveys conducted by the University, and through their final assessment task, which is a personal reflection. Increasing engagement by the students and their feedback indicates that the majority of students believe that an online sense of community has been developed in IBP through the incorporation of Crowdicity. Student sense of community in the classroom is measured in week 11 of a 12-week semester through a reflection survey using a validated scale adapted from Rovai (2002) and also includes demographic questions, and questions

relating to student's activity and involvement in university and non-university social networks. Results of this survey are forthcoming in future publications.

Overall students find the unit challenging and valuable to their careers and futures. Students have identified the best aspects of the unit as follows:

- The unit is very "friendly".
- It boosts my confidence and level of interacting with people and socially in public.
- It was a great way to help first-year students settle into uni.
- The different styles of tutorials. Often very engaging, and helped people to step outside their comfort zone.
- The use of social media so everyone can come together and help each other with questions.

Areas that still require improvement according to students include:

- Working on several different platforms can get confusing.
- Maybe make video blogs optional with an in person or in class presentation. Mature age students who don't feel comfortable using technology for assessments have extra stress levels trying to figure out how to execute the tasks and make a good video at the same time.

Group work is rewarded within the Crowdicity platform when individuals submit posts tagging their fellow teammates to ensure everyone in the team gains the points for work co-created. Counter to negative sentiments often found when students provide feedback about group work (Burke 2011), since Semester Two, 2016 IBP has seen the number of comments about group work being the "Best aspects of the unit"

in student feedback surveys increase by a factor of five times with four comments (3% of responses) in Semester Two, 2016 increasing to 28 comments (15% of responses) in Semester Two, 2018. As one student shares in the Semester Two 2018 Student Feedback Survey:

Group activities that are fun have been a really great experience. Normally group assignments are tolerated, much like trips to the dentist, and are never liked by anyone. These group assignments actually have brought my group together as they're straight forward and easy, but leave plenty of room for creativity. This is very important as very few jobs in the workforce don't involve teamwork, so learning to enjoy it is valuable.

## Learnings and future research

Reflecting on our journey so far, it is motivating to consider how enabling a sense of belonging has been found to be a key ingredient in perceptions of teacher excellence (Moore & Kuol, 2007). Educators have the ability to make a difference in students' emotional lives and responses to study. Using educational practices that engage, nurture and challenge their students can help them develop into effective learners (Laurillard, 2013). This is especially important for first-year units where there is such a diverse cohort of students undertaking their studies. Taking a 'sense of belonging' approach provides educators with a way to reflect on not only institutional and discipline belonging and activities which enable these, but also how developing of community in the classroom and building relationships between the teaching team and student peers can be an important element in assessment design and curriculum delivery.

Encouraging collaboration between students is an important teaching strategy for preparing students for work and for building group affinity and affiliations (Björnsdóttir, 2017). Kimmel and Volet (2010) argue that lecturers in higher education play an important role in

designing and monitoring group activities, and in deliberately constructing ways that cultural and other forms of diversity are valued. Indeed there is a considerable body of literature that highlights the importance of lecturer communication style (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Dawson, 2008; Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2017), expression of empathy (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2003) and particular pedagogies (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009) in the development of a student's sense of trust, support and belonging within the class and subsequently within the university. Student sense of belonging to class communities is agreed to be an important predictor of student academic success. However, there is little written about the conditions under which student communities and sense of belonging can best be fostered through group-based activities. This is an important gap, as group work is now a ubiquitous element of assessment across the Australian university system as well as in the workplace.

Whilst there is broad agreement that university lecturers should develop effective pedagogies for supporting successful group projects, this requires them to understand and work with the diverse kinds of capital that university students bring to the learning environment and in their approach to set tasks (Pymm & Kapp, 2013). Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) have called for initiatives that focus more on cultural aspects of identity in developing effective methods and styles of academic teaching and learning. This is crucial to the success of group work assessments, as it is still true that "the discourse of 'belonging' is shaped by a narrow student profile" (Thomas, 2015, p. 38).

Furthermore, facilitation skills of teachers are a primary vehicle to realising and supporting how group-work is undertaken. Because learning is shaped by student dispositions (and vice versa), it is also vital that the 'emotional dimensions of learning' are scrutinised in teaching and

learning (Tett et al., 2017, p. 169). Tett et al. (2017) found in their study that students trust academic staff to care about their experiences and suggest that a holistic approach to care would involve students and staff 'actively seeking to include emotions in the construction of knowledge' (p. 177). This raises challenges given the very diverse student cohorts with which academics work.

Previous research shows that small group activities in the university setting do not necessarily lead to greater engagement between local and international students in a given class. Not only has this been found to limit the learning and intercultural development of local students from mono-lingual and mono-cultural backgrounds (Colvin, Fozdar, & Volet, 2015) but it potentially limits the likelihood that group work in this context contributes to the sense of belonging and associated benefits for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Similar limitations may be experienced by students from non-dominant age groups, varying socio-economic backgrounds (Devlin, 2013) or lived experience. From an educational perspective, Kimmel and Volet (2010) argue that lecturers in higher education play an important role in designing and monitoring group activities, and in deliberately constructing ways that cultural and other forms of diversity are valued. This has presented opportunities for the IBP teaching team to better explore and understand differences in a sense of belonging as experienced by local and international students and indeed non-dominant groups, as well as the impacts that group work has within these contexts. To this end we are currently conducting research exploring the impact of tutor facilitation training on student sense of belonging which will be the focus of future publications.

## Conclusion

Developing a meaningful core unit that is not connected to any particular business discipline yet equips students for their future studies and effectively prepares them for personal and professional lives is an interesting quest and one where the teaching team has found the 'sense of belonging' approach to be of value. Fostering and supporting a large cross-disciplinary teaching team through regular tutor briefings and resource sharing has helped to build a sense of belonging with the teaching team. Through networked learning, activity-based tutorials and the integration of Crowdcity students have the opportunity to interact with other students, the teaching team and also with industry professionals. This has helped to develop students' confidence, communication skills, professionalism, networking thereby building a sense of belonging, whilst helping them prepare for their futures.

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