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Coming to belong in the university through small acts of connection

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ABSTRACT

Belonging is recognised as an important factor in student well-being, persistence and success at university, particularly for first-year students. Belonging is often described as an individual basic human need; to feel accepted, valued, and connected with peers, teaching staff, the curriculum, the university or places and communities. However, less is known about what students do to foster belonging for themselves. This paper adopts a relational and situated perspective to examine how first-year university students create belonging in an experiential sense. Based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 19 participants, this study explores the range of connections that students make in their first year of study and the meaning they attribute to these connections in relation to belonging. The findings suggest that multiple senses of belonging may arise from small acts of connection made by students and reciprocated by others (e.g. peers, teachers, support staff, family and friends). These insights contribute to understanding how students see themselves as belonging, and what might be needed to nurture these connections in ways that acknowledge their diverse needs, backgrounds and experiences.

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Belonging; first-year students; connection; micro-moments; qualitative research

Introduction

Belonging is recognised as an important contributor to student well-being, persistence and success at university. Broadly, belonging is the experience of feeling accepted, valued and connected with community and place (Ahn and Davis 2020; Strayhorn 2019). Existing literature on student belonging focuses on varied ways of belonging, such as with peers and the curriculum (DiGiacomo et al. 2023), with teaching staff (Tice et al. 2021), at university (Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt 2021) or with the places, resources and communities outside of universities (Tran and Gomes 2017). Less is known about what students *do* to foster belonging for themselves. To address this gap, this paper seeks to identify connections that first-year students make, their experiences of feeling disconnected,

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and the meaning of these for their sense of belonging at university. We focus on first-year students' transition into university as they are particularly vulnerable to feelings of not belonging (Meehan and Howells 2019; Naylor, Baik, and Arkoudis 2018). These insights can help the university sector to understand how students make sense of their experiences of belonging and what contributes to this perception, and consequently, examine what might be needed to nurture these connections.

What is belonging?

As with many complex social phenomena, there are multiple meanings and definitions of belonging. These are broadly aligned with psychological and sociological approaches. Psychological perspectives focus on how the individual *feels* internally, with belonging described as an individual's innate human need (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and of being respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group (Strayhorn 2019) and 'the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community' (Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods 2007, 804). From this view, in higher education, belonging is commonly described as 'students' subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness' (Thomas 2012, 12). A sense of university belonging is linked to students' positive self-perceptions of social acceptance, motivation, academic success, and student well-being (Ahn and Davis 2020; Allen et al. 2024, Meehan and Howells 2019).

Belonging can also be regarded as sociological and relational (Guyotte, Flint, and Latopolski 2021). From this perspective, belonging is multiple, relational and always in flux: 'we are always renegotiating our sense of belonging depending upon our context and what interaction we are having' (Gravett and Ajjawi 2021, 1391). Belonging is, therefore, not only a feeling *within* an individual but also bound to the sense of self in relation to others, including group, community and place. How the individual's relationships and boundaries with these others are developed and enacted is referred to as the politics of belonging; a process of self-identification that is at once personal and political (Yuval-Davis 2006). Belonging provides a sense of legitimatised comfort: a feeling of being at home in a place or community but also 'a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists' forms of inclusion and exclusion from places and communities (Mallman et al. 2021, 1452). Belonging is thus not always positive as it can be an act of exclusion as well as inclusion.

Fostering belonging through connections

Focussing on building belonging through connectedness is a means of bridging both psychological and sociological perspectives. It includes both the internal feelings and the contexts in which connections take place. Indeed, focussing on connectedness forms the foundation of much practical advice. Allen and colleagues (2021) situate students' competence to connect with others in their belonging framework. In their retrospective of twenty years of belonging research, connectedness to peers, staff, and the institution was found to be the primary influencer of student belonging (Allen et al. 2024). Teachers are encouraged to foster peer-to-peer connections to build belonging, through front-ending activities with icebreakers, designing teaching and learning activities which prompt peer-to-peer connections (Tran 2013) and low stakes assessment involving peer collaboration (Thomas, Herbert, and Teras 2014). Moreover, belonging to a university campus is commonly considered in reference to interactions with peers in extra-curricular activities (Munoz, Baik, and Lodge 2020).

The significance of connection is underpinned by a broad range of research. Positive connections between students and their teachers may improve students' engagement in learning and foster their motivation and persistence (Munoz, Baik, and Lodge 2020). Such interactions can also support student engagement with the curriculum (Cohen and Viola 2022) although students are sensitive to the authenticity or genuineness of their connections (Gravett and Winstone 2022). Students' acts that initiate, develop and maintain connections with peers contribute to their feeling of belonging (Horner 2022). In one study, students expressed that protecting one another was an important part of having a sense of belonging; that is having responsibility for their peers' wellbeing (Napper, Stone, and Neely 2023).

Further, students report taking ownership of belonging through curating spaces, volunteering for meaningful work and seeking to make an impact on their communities through these connections (Ajjawi, Gravett, and O'Shea 2023). They also view belonging as having the right fit in their course, future career path or institution (Kahu, Ashley, and Picton 2022). These are tantalising clues around students' active pursuit of belonging. We seek to systematically investigate how students make their own sense of belonging, specifically in their first-year of university.

First-year student connection and belonging

Supporting first-year students to make connections and foster belonging matters. Transitions can make people feel vulnerable, and this is especially so for marginalised and international students who might feel like they do not belong (Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker 2019; Bunn, Threadgold, and Burke 2020; O'Shea 2021). The first year of study is when students 'must acquire the academic skills and literacies needed to be successful and independent in their learning throughout their undergraduate years and for a lifetime of professional practice' (Kift 2015, 54).

Points of transition are difficult. First-year students in large classes with fewer opportunities to form relationships can feel lonely and isolated (Horner 2022). However, first-years are diverse cohorts and respond in different ways. Some seek meaningful friendships while others are more strategically oriented towards academic connections (Gravett and Winstone 2022). Mature-age first-year students reported lower levels of belonging due to having little connection to the university, while connecting with peers reduced their sense of isolation (Kahu 2014). Online learners are thought to need deliberate 'opportunities to engage with others so that expression, development, tolerance and recognition of their diverse identities may in part compensate for any lack felt by not having a physical presence' (Delahunty, Verenikina, and Jones 2014, 18) and this may be exacerbated in the first year when things are less familiar. International students often form friendships with co-national and international peers from similar cultural backgrounds (Tran and Pham 2016) which help them deal with loneliness. However, such silos may prevent them from developing a sense of belonging to the host communities (Kusek 2015).

Extracurricular activities, which can be a significant means to foster first year belonging, might also exclude students who may not attend due to religious, personal, or other circumstances (Winstone et al. 2022). As Thomas explains, 'extra-curricular participation in sports, volunteering and politics are neither accessible nor necessarily of interest to those studying alongside a career, caring or family life commitments' (Thomas 2015, 40). In short, a fixed view of belonging coupled with pressure to take part in activities might add burden and anxiety to first-year students to conform. Silver's (2020) ethnographic research into social connections through extra-curricular activities points to this problem where the cost of inclusion is student conformity and limited expressions of self. The struggle to conform may also exacerbate students' sense of difference. In conclusion, this brief summary of the literature offers insight into the complexity and diversity of the student experience, and how belonging is more than an individual's feelings, it is constituted through processual experiences of connection.

Connections as an analytic tool

Belonging is an abstract notion and, as noted, can be conceptualised from a variety of perspectives. To understand belonging, we turn to the idea of connection. Strayhorn (2019) suggests connections are the means through which students' sense of belonging is derived, and students themselves identify social connections as one of the most important determinants of belonging (van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman 2020). Exploring connections and disconnections is a way of tracing belonging as it allows researchers to identify specific experiences that result in feelings of belonging or not belonging. These connections are situated in time and space – as concrete acts that can be examined through students' accounts of their experiences. Belonging as a way of being-in-the-world is an

abstract concept that becomes tangible through relationships with place, things and other people, that create it and result from it (Bennett 2015). Not all connections will result in belonging but they are a necessary first step. Following Gravett and Ajjawi (2021), we position belonging as a situated practice. It centralises student enactment of belonging but avoids generalised assumptions regarding how, where and with whom belonging might be experienced.

This study aims to understand how belonging is enacted by first-year university students by exploring how students make connections and the meanings they derive from these. It asks:

- What is the range of connections that students make in their first year of study?
- What meaning do they attribute to these connections in relation to belonging and learning?

Methods

Given the subjective and multiple nature of belonging, we conducted a qualitative semi-structured interview study to understand students' experiences of connection and disconnection in the first year of their university degree. Ethical approval for the research was obtained through the university's Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Advisory Group: HAE-20-176. The relevant university is a large, relatively young university (established in 1974) with diverse students and strong online presence (33% of students are enrolled as external or fully online students) established many years before the pandemic.

Recruitment, sampling, and participants

Students were recruited from large first-year units, in each of four faculties: Arts and Education, Health, Business and Law, and Science, Engineering, and the Built Environment. Invitations to take part in the study were posted on each unit site in the online learning management system, which all students can access.

Interested students were first asked to provide optional demographics to enable us to select a diverse sample of students. This consisted of respondents' age, gender, full – or part-time mode of study, domestic or international status, as well as the faculty, course, and unit the student was studying. Nineteen students were selected for interview to increase diversity in experiences, with data deemed sufficient to answer the research questions. While we sought diversity, we emphasise that we did not seek representative diversity – that is to say, we did not wish to assume in a qualitative study that a demographic represented an identity position.

Diversity was considered across disciplines, mode of study, age and gender. Of the nineteen participants, 16 were studying full time (84%), 12 identified as female (63%) and 7 as male (37%), 10 were younger than 21 years of age (56%), and two were international students (11%). All faculties were represented. Fifteen students were direct high school graduates (79%), 4 had previously completed a degree or attended college. The students who had come directly from high school would have completed their final year of study through pandemic lockdowns, home and online schooling. Thirteen students worked as well as studied (68%). Seven had chosen to study fully online (37%), 12 (63%) were hybrid and pandemic disrupted.

Data generation and analysis

Interviews ranged in length from 25 to 65 min. Each participant was reimbursed with an AUD\$30 gift card for their time following the interview. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team in May-June 2021, during the pandemic, following students' completion of their first trimester of study. The research team comprised educational researchers, academic developers and teachers. The interview guide questions were grounded in experiences by asking students to recount stories, for example:

- Talk me through a **connection that** you value with regard to your study.
- Talk me through **when you felt disconnected** with regard to your study.

The nature of connection was not specified. This was left open to student meaning-making and interpretation. In addition, we asked about a time students felt they belonged and did not belong. We asked about students' perspectives on their experiences with questions such as: 'What does belonging mean to you?' and 'How might you explain to a new first-year student how to connect?'

Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed professionally. A research assistant checked and corrected all transcripts by listening to the audio files. Thematic analysis was informed by Thematic Framework Analysis (Ritchie and Spencer 1994) a structured, interpretive approach to qualitative data analysis. This approach was chosen due to the size of the team to enable all research members to be involved and to promote rigour. It is composed of five steps: data familiarisation (coming to know the data), framework identification (preliminary identification of concepts), indexing (linking the framework and the data), charting (ordering and abstracting), and mapping and interpretation of themes (building and communicating understanding against literature).

After reading a sample of the data, the research team met to discuss inductive codes and develop a preliminary coding framework that included for example different types of connections that students made. Data were subsequently coded by the first and second authors, and each code's data read and discussed by a pair of researchers towards abstraction from the specific story and seeking patterns within and across the students and their contexts. The interview guide was structured to encourage students to give examples of things they do and then followed up with questions about how they made sense of these connections with respect to feelings of belongingness. We were therefore able to trace the connections that students made with how this made them feel throughout the analysis. Our developing concepts and themes were then discussed and interpreted by the team as a whole, comparing and contrasting our interpretations of the data alongside the literature and conceptual framing of enactments of belonging. This process was repeated to expand and develop shared interpretations of the data. The steps of framework analysis were iterative and their boundaries blurred, rather than sequential.

Findings

We first present data related to enactments of connection and disconnection, followed by how participants interpreted these experiences in terms of enacting belonging.

Enactments of connections and disconnections in the first year

Participants talked about connecting with their peers, the university, and their course or discipline. However, they also mentioned instances of disconnection from their peers and studies, while some emphasised pre-existing connections from outside the university.

Dis/Connecting with peers

Connections with peers fulfilled different student needs. For example, one student, S2, who had enrolled straight from high school and moved to a residence at a more urban campus, described wanting to make social connections and friendships. In contrast, a mature-age student, S14, who was studying online, explained that he wanted academic connections to form a study group with peers who would aim for high grades. Participants described connecting with peers for academic and/or social purposes, often through incidental processes, as described by S24 'spontaneous conversation that does happen when you're on campus, and just even as you're waiting to go into a class'. Some connections began when the participants reached out to their peers during orientation

week. At this time, they had a chance to meet other students enrolled in similar courses and to add each other to Facebook groups or Messenger chat groups created by students for specific units. More students joined these course – or unit-specific groups as the term progressed.

One student recounted joy in connecting with their peer through a side-channel chat during a dull online lecture, and another spoke about being on Zoom with a peer while they did their own work individually from their own homes. Attending in-person classes like labs and simulations was also an opportunity to meet other students, as well as group tasks and breakout rooms during online sessions. Participants recounted meeting other students on campus through sports teams or living in student residencies where they can ‘play basketball, watch a movie, study, because a lot of [them] are doing similar courses or units’. Some of these connections evolved into friendships beyond study, while others remained focused on academic purposes.

A prior sense of belonging to a location influenced some participants’ confidence in making connections. One participant described their concerns regarding forming new connections as they moved from a regional area to live on campus:

I was really nervous coming to live on campus because obviously I’m from [a regional town] and all my friends are from there, some are in Melbourne now. I had a really good friend group there, so I was coming here and I’m thinking, ‘How am I going to go making new friends?’ (S2).

In contrast, participants found it difficult to connect with peers during the online study, as most kept their cameras off or because ‘you can’t really speak to anyone’ while the teachers talk. Although some students valued the opportunities offered by breakout rooms, others complained about having limited interactions and being ignored by teammates when trying to coordinate group work. Others noted that they tried to make friends during early weeks, but there was no connection between classes after they moved online during the pandemic, hoping that it may be easier when they return to campus.

However, like S14, some participants indicated they were not interested in the social aspects of university life due to their work and personal commitments, however, they still valued the connections they made for study purposes.

Dis/Connecting with the university – through teachers, services and extracurricular activities

Participants described the sense of care they felt from staff they found approachable and support services provided by the university.

I think that all the support services make it very obvious that [university name] does actually care about their students, which I really like to see. Most of the tutors have been very friendly, they’ve been very welcoming, and they encourage you to ask questions if you have any queries, if you need any help with anything. I think that overall [university name] has been a very welcoming place (S19).

This quote illustrates how connecting with the institution is mediated by interactions with teachers and support services, especially when students feel they mattered to staff and the institution. Some participants explained how they felt connected when facilitators ‘respond to you right away, in-person and online and they’re always really willing to help’ or when ‘they speak to everyone, and they listen’ (S8). Other participants highlighted the importance of being able to reach out to teachers through discussion forums (which also benefitted other students), online drop-in sessions or via email. This asynchronous communication was valued by participants as ‘it fits with [their] work schedule and [their] personal life’ and extended to the accessibility of online study materials that allow them the flexibility to study at their own time and pace. Some participants described the importance of their relationship with their facilitators (S14, S19), for example, the helpfulness of teaching staff creating safe environments to ask questions or the facilitators talking with passion for the topic.

Some students also recognised the importance of welcoming support services for a sense of mattering within the university. For example, S21 described feeling welcomed and having a personal connection with staff members from the Indigenous studies centre. S20 was in direct contact with a disability support staff member, who reached out and provided useful information for getting them started at the university. This participant explained that 'it's good to know that if [they] do need them, then [they] have them without having to have 10,000 different pieces of paper to say why [they] need an extension', which shows that these services need to be perceived as a friendly and seamless resource and not as a series of bureaucratic processes.

The participants also valued the offer of activities or resources facilitated by the university but run with students' help. These included Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (open study groups led by a more advanced student), math and writing tutors, or UniStart (a series of student-designed online modules to prepare students for university study). Other participants also mentioned feeling connected through non-academic activities like sports teams, diverse cultural or discipline-specific associations and so on. Many of these activities support connections between students but can also contribute to a sense of care and mattering within the university.

Nevertheless, some participants also described situations when they felt disconnected from the university and their studies. This disconnection was described as a physical separation and/or a social one. For instance, S11, an international student living overseas, felt disconnected during online tutorials missing first-hand experiences of interacting with peers on campus or asking quick questions of their teachers. They explained that they felt connected to their course and studies, but not to the university because they have not been there physically. Other participants described how the actions or inactions of some teachers contributed to a sense of disconnection, such as when their questions were not answered or when the online classes were not interactive or too rushed and confusing. Moreover, some participants explained that they felt disconnected when they felt overwhelmed as it makes them 'less able to approach people for help' (S15).

Dis/Connecting with the discipline

Participants also connected with their course or the content of specific units. For example, S19 studying criminology explained that they 'really like the fact that [the unit of study/subject] addresses the idea that crime as a whole isn't just the legal definition of it, there's actually social reasons and cultural reasons of what crime is and how we should perceive it'. Similarly, S12 pointed out that such discussions showed them 'what [Social Work] actually was' and feeling 'like it was the right path for [them]'. S24 discussed how they connected more deeply to a unit of study on sex and gender, as they found other students equally passionate about the topic, in contrast to other units in which interactions were perceived as 'quite male dominated' which led to a questioning of the basis of doing the degree: 'I felt like there was a bit of a disconnect between myself and the people that I heard speaking in class and that I suppose I wondered then whether the business side of the degree was still for me'. S4 also mentioned not being 'sure if [they were] in the right degree', although they appreciated having career-related assignments that allowed them to reflect on their degree choice and what they will get from it. S20 reported being disconnected from rushed lectures in science then feeling confused, stupid and like something was wrong. These accounts show the complexity of feeling connected to or disconnected from one's discipline, as this may relate to the knowledge and practices of the discipline itself, but this appears to be mediated by the course design and interactions with other people within the course.

Dis/Connections outside the university

Although connecting with others at the university was important for most participants, on some occasions, connections beyond their studies were equally or more important. These were

connections that predated students' enrolment and included family support, which helped to reduce isolation during lockdowns, and friends outside university, who would on some occasions help to study. For example, S3 talked about keeping in contact with high school friends and sometimes joining quiet Zoom calls for study (or silent study sessions), while S20 mentioned discussing assignments with a gaming buddy located overseas who had studied a similar degree. On the other hand, S18, who was new to the city as an international student and 'didn't have many friends when [they] went into lockdown', struggled with their study and mental health from 'just being sat at home, seeing the same people that [they] have been seeing for 18 years'.

Additionally, some participants talked about how studies and family connections intersected each other. For example, S11 mentioned that studying from overseas meant effectively living in a different time zone to the rest of their household. S27 set up clear structures to have time for their partner, children, and work, so they could study when the children are sleeping, as their family is their main 'support and connection'. By contrast, S18 struggled with studying because of a 'no-locked-door' policy in a loud household and S22 experienced the pressure of parents' expectations: 'You're home five days a week and you only got a 70-something? Why aren't you getting high distinctions?'

Multiple ways of making meaning about belonging

Belonging had diverse meanings for different participants, but in general, it evoked positive feelings that rose from connecting with others, identifying with, and helping each other, or feeling a sense of purpose in what they do and their discipline. The following quote shows the importance of belonging to this student and its function:

If you belong, then you have a firmer ground to stand on and when you have that, you're able to make effective change in your life and support other people (S21).

Participants made meaning of belonging through their connections but in diverse ways. Some described belonging in affective terms of enjoying 'being around people' and having a 'nice group of friends' (S13), being 'on the same wavelength' (S17) or having 'similar interests' and 'common goals' (S19), and being accepted and respected. Participants felt they belonged among their peers through mutual engagement in classes, discussions and sharing ideas, mutual support by sharing experiences and helping each other to learn, working out together how to tackle a task, learning from each other about the world and themselves, and a general 'sense of unity', community and camaraderie. For example, S13 describes a moment of shared vulnerability with peers in a simulation class: 'Oh I don't know what's going on' and they're [peers] also feeling that way ... It was just fun laughing together and realising, 'Okay, we might not know everything, but at least we have each other to learn.'

There was a link for some between friendships and study. For example, S19 noted that keeping in contact with friends helps to stay in a 'good mood for study'. S14 valued connecting with their peers primarily to support their study. They joined a WhatsApp group with peers to talk about their class and arranged a practice session to prepare for practical tests. This same participant explained that they were not 'coming back to school for the social aspects of being in school. Using the groups as a method to bounce ideas off each other'. Mature-age participants, and those who do not live near the campus, had less interest in the social aspects of university life, for example: 'When I'm 28, I'm not necessarily looking for a university experience probably like an 18-year-old is, but that's just the stage I'm at in my life, I guess' (S12). Yet this student did value the friendships that developed during their study, which they did not anticipate:

I can tend to overthink some assignments, so I think she's quite grounding for me [...]. I'm not a stressed person, I just analyse things. For me, she keeps me streamlined. [...] it is hard when you're older to make friends. It's a bit of a weird concept, so it's nice to be able to make a friend who has similar interests and is looking at doing the same field as me eventually (S12).

This could build into a sense of community that was not the same as individual relationships. For example, despite not making personal connections with their peers, S11 mentioned that ‘if they ask a question, one of us would reply to it. There’s a little community of us helping each other when it comes to stuff like this’. S17 explained that in contrast to the ‘cutthroat’ stereotype of law students, ‘there’s a lot of support, and I guess guidance on things, and everyone’s quick to answer if anyone has ever any concerns. I feel like there’s a really big teamwork mentality’. This type of online collaboration contributed to a feeling of being in ‘the same boat’ (S15, S19), which also occurred during in-person classes: ‘The fact that in a lecture theatre you’re sitting next to someone that you don’t know and they’re acting very friendly towards you, makes you feel welcome’ (S3).

Participants reinforced the idea that belonging also came from teachers being genuinely interested in their learning, willing to listen and have consultations, and supporting meaningful discussions about the discipline. Beyond connecting with individuals, students considered the cognitive connection with discipline in terms of fit, of feeling that ‘this is what [they were] meant to do’ or being authentic to what they want. Other participants talked about having ‘a purpose in’ (S23) or being ‘proud of’ (S3) what they are doing. Alternatively, this sense of purpose came from what they could contribute to their home communities, like supporting the legal representation of Indigenous communities during the pandemic.

Discussion

This study identifies connections made by first-year students – generally small, daily acts – and highlights how these are woven into multiple ways to make meaning about belonging. Notably, there was an ordinariness to disconnection, it resulted from an invitation for connection being rebuffed or ignored, and exacerbated at times by distance and physical separation. This analysis suggests, as others have before, that belonging is multiple, relational and means different things to different students that extend beyond interpersonal relationships (e.g. Gravett and Ajjawi 2021). Connections satisfy different needs for belonging which accord with Nunn’s (2021) three realms of belonging – social, academic and campus-community. These needs and connections were found to be dynamic, changing over time with, at times, blurring of boundaries as academic connections became friendships and friends offered academic belonging through becoming study partners.

Our research shows that students make sense of belonging in simple and situated ways. Belonging can be found in the connections made over drinking coffee or in tackling an assessment task, or attending an interesting lecture or talking with a teacher. These shared moments of respect, recognition, vulnerability and connection contributed to belonging. Beyond emotional and cognitive connections, our research shows a more practical, tangible form of understanding belonging – as a state of relating.

We propose that these small acts of connection, enabled by kindness, care, openness, and shared interests, allowed students to create their senses of belonging, without seeing it as completely located within either the individual or the institution. We draw here from the literature on staff belonging, not yet extended to student belonging, that explores the small moments by which teachers create everyday opportunities for connection, belonging and hope within university life (Gannon et al. 2019; Gravett et al. 2024). Micro-moments of connection can render joy and alter relational flows. In research with academics, these micro-moments of connection have been described as fleeting gestures, eye contact, and being seen (Taylor et al. 2020) or as we see in our data, small chat messages during class or a response from a teacher or content that resonates. And while these connections are at times fleeting, they generate powerful effects creating an atmosphere of fun and belonging. A micro-moment of connection ‘lifts the tenseness of the encounter and brings a small moment of pleasure’ (Gannon et al. 2019, 51) such as shared laughter over feeling lost in class.

Nunn (2021) identified an overwhelming sense of trying to join multiple societies and clubs and not feeling right in any of them, especially for first in family students. Thus, the notion of belonging

as a diverse collection of situated micro-moments of connection can help lower the stakes for first-year students – ‘How can I belong?’ is a more loaded question than ‘Who can I connect with?’. This conception also recognises that micro-moments of connection can be hindered or enhanced by particular circumstances and thus subject to tensions less binary than some concepts of belonging/not belonging suggest. For example, our international students who kept Australian time zone hours (unsocial hours from their home country) felt more separated from their family and friends at home but could connect with the course better. Students could create points of connection in and around the formal curriculum using a variety of technologies and for a variety of reasons but also balance these with other connections with work, home or socialisation. It allows students to recognise the connections they bring to the institution and how these might shift and change in order to allow new connections to grow. A focus on micro-moments respects the temporalities of relationships, and the need at times to actively disconnect.

This conception of belonging as diverse micro-moments of connection contrasts with how we speak of student belonging as pro-social, encompassing every aspect of their university experience as measured through institutional annual surveys. For example, the question ‘to what extent have you had a sense of belonging to your institution?’ is featured in the Australian national student experience survey. This can raise students’ anxieties about belonging when they might not always feel that way (Gravett, Ajjawi, and O Shea 2023). Belonging as micro-moments of connection affords more nuance, and acknowledges that belonging is created through mutual agentic connection, not something we do for students, but also not something they do alone, and not necessarily all encompassing. It also shows how connection can be made within the curriculum and for study; not requiring joining additional societies, or sporting events or volunteering (although these are also available for those who choose to join). This is important for time-poor students and those who are primarily academically motivated. This study adds knowledge about the connections students make that contribute to their sense of belonging and how these play out in their day-to-day lives.

Implications

This study underlines the need to design for student diversity. By thinking about first-year students as all being in the ‘same boat’ or as homogenous, we make invisible their individual experiences and the work involved in connecting. For example, feeling connected to the discipline may be important for completing a degree, but this connection may be based on an intrinsic interest in the field or an opportunity for changing careers and improving one’s life. Feeling connected to people or community, may be important for mental well-being and reducing feelings of isolation, but those connections can be to other students or friends and family outside the university, and may be for social or academic purposes.

What can universities do? They can create opportunities for connections by offering spaces; facilitating in-class relationships; showing care through every aspect of administrative and communication processes; and providing multiple options inside and outside the classroom, on-campus and online. Such opportunities must be diverse. Some students may want to make friends, some may want to have study buddies, some may want to relate their studies to their future or current work, some may have particular cultural backgrounds or may be living in Australia for the first time or belong to different stages of their life.

What can educators and programme directors do? Understanding relational connections as fundamental to learning and teaching can encourage a focus on finding ways to engage in meaningful connections with others, including both students and colleagues (Gravett 2023). As a first step, teaching staff can help create meaningful learning activities that foster low stakes connections, building trusting relationships between students as well as with themselves and through modelling a caring approach in all their interactions with students. For example, during group work, staff can give time for students to know each other; or in large classes, pairing students in multiple ways for sharing activities, allowing diverse students to find organic connections. Building multiple

opportunities for connection through the curriculum overcomes the limitations highlighted by Silver (2020) and Nunn (2021) of students becoming stuck in limiting social groups and bolsters those who have struggled to make connections. Students look to teaching staff to be available, however part of that communication process for teaching staff is managing student expectations of response time and availability.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a rapidly expanding literature on student belonging in higher education. Students make connections that contribute to their sense of belonging. Belonging can therefore be understood not as something they have but something they *do*. For some, belonging inscribes purpose and action – not just a feeling. By understanding it as being constituted through small acts of connection, we highlight the relational actions and interactions that form a student’s multiple and diverse senses of belonging. Relational pedagogies may offer a roadmap to better foster connections and thus student belonging inside and outside the classroom.

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