The Importance of Belonging: A Higher Education Perspective

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the dissertation is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Rachel Wilson,

November 2016
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**Nomenclature**

At RMIT there are a number of terms that are institutionally specific and as such do not have the same meanings to an external audience. The following table sets out these differences to avoid confusion when reading this document.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elsewhere</th>
<th>RMIT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Course</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Program</td>
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<td>Faculty</td>
<td>College</td>
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**Abstract**

The Importance of Belonging: A Higher Education Perspective

Universities remain one of the most important cultural sites to teach our citizens how to function within an increasingly complex society. Yet the contemporary
university has emerged as a highly contested site with the pressures of economic rationalism, neoliberalism, managerialism and massification often conflicting with traditional ideas of a liberal education. Caught in the centre of these debates is the student experience.

Through this practice-led research project I describe and critically analyse how I came to co-lead a large-scale student engagement project designed specifically to activate the concept of belonging within the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, via The Belonging Project (2011-2015), and through formative work undertaken on the design of The ASPERA Online Archive.

Utilising practitioner-led action research methodology, this research asks the question: How can the concept of belonging be used to help situate and activate my practice as a tertiary academic within the contemporary university? In answering this question, I explore the ways in which my practice as a tertiary academic has changed through the undertaking of a significant longitudinal research project, The Belonging Project. I outline how notions of belonging are commonly applied within higher education contexts and situate the work of the project within the literature. I also explore how the concept of belonging is embedded within the collaborative practice that is at the centre of both The ASPERA Online Archive and The Belonging Project.

The work on the project has generated a number of scholarly outcomes, situating my work, and that of my collaborators, within a specific set of learning and teaching debates related to student wellbeing and student engagement through to the changing role of higher education more generally.

In conclusion, I outline how this research has changed many aspects of my practice as a media educator and helped focus my commitment to the transformative potential of formal higher education more generally. In undertaking this doctoral project, my conceptualisation of my role within higher education has shifted significantly and I have come to better understand how I can continue to operate authentically and ethically within the academy. This research also offers a path for other academics applying the broad concepts of belonging and inclusivity to various aspects of their academic career and the higher education environment more generally.
The recommended pathway through the material presented for examination is to start with the overview document *The Ethos of Belonging: A narrative model approach to student engagement 2011–2015* (Clarke & Wilson, 2016). The Belonging Project was a multi-phase project which grew in complexity each year. This particular document has been written for an uninitiated audience and is designed to provide a guide to the project phases from a position of hindsight. It introduces the reader to the project’s history, The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement, our guiding principles and a small sample of the work conducted during each phase of the project.

Next I would ask the readers to take a look at The Belonging Project website located here:

www.rmit.edu.au/mediacommunication/belonging-project

The website both act's as a repository of the annual reports and scholarly outcomes and provides additional material of the project’s outcomes from the student perspective. I recommend readers watch the videos, that succinctly capture the student voice, found here:

www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-education/academic-schools/media-and-communication/research/projects/the-belonging-project/resources/

The annual reports provide greater detail of each phase of the project and the publications and conference papers give a sense of how we have continued to communicate the project's outcomes to a scholarly audience.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction, Background and Research Methodology

Introduction

This dissertation presents an account of practitioner-led research undertaken within the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. It forms one part of a tripartite doctoral submission that includes the project artefacts (see additional material) and a public presentation. Together these three elements make the whole of my PhD submission.

It is a story of discovery and of action. In this dissertation I discuss how I came upon the unique characteristics of the concept of belonging; how these characteristics were activated through a major longitudinal learning and teaching research project; and how my academic practice has transformed in light of these discoveries. Additionally, the dissertation outlines why I believe that The Belonging Narrative Model offers a unifying meta-narrative capable of contextualising much of the student experience within higher education.

The primary driver of this research has been my desire to understand what meaningful and authentic action I can take within my academic practice to counteract the persuasive agendas of the economically rationalist managerialism that defines much of contemporary higher education experience. The practice-based methodology used to explore these questions took place within a genuinely collaborative learning and teaching research project designed to produce a holistic curriculum model for students and colleagues called The Belonging Project.

This dissertation is divided into four main chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the context in which the research has been conducted and my methodological approach. Chapter 2 situates the project work within the theoretical boundaries of the concept of belonging and, more specifically, belonging as it is conceptualised within higher education. Chapter 3 discusses
how an ethos of belonging has been activated within The Belonging Project and Chapter 4 deliberates and reflects on the insights and changes to my academic practice that this research has prompted.

My doctoral research journey began with an interest in addressing a specific disciplinary problem impacting my, and that of many other disciplinary colleagues, everyday teaching practice, but expanded over time to a broader examination of my approach to tertiary education more generally. Along the way I have learnt a great deal about how contemporary universities operate and how I can carve out an authentic, value-driven space for myself and like minded colleagues.

Background

INTRODUCING MYSELF

Since graduating in 1993 with a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree in Media and Visual Communication from Deakin University, I have worked as a university lecturer in a range of media departments across Victoria, Australia – primarily teaching and researching screen-based media production. In 2003 I completed a Master of Arts in Cinema Studies by submitting the first practice-led thesis within the La Trobe University MA program. Although my disciplinary background is in film and media production and I continue to maintain strong links with my filmmaking peers, I foremost identify as a media educator. Making this distinction is essential to how I have conducted my research and the community for whom it may prove to be the most useful.

I was attracted to the discipline of media and, in particular media production, from an early age. Through watching documentaries on television as a teenager I became aware of mass media’s ability to change minds and offer alternative perspectives. I remain deeply fascinated by the potential of all media platforms to perform an informed educational role and to provide a forum for those at the margins of our communities who struggle to have a voice within the debates that define our lives. It is these idealistic values of emancipation that drove me to study media and education at a tertiary level and that continue to inform my approach to teaching in this field.

Throughout my career as a media academic, I have gravitated towards projects that focus on resolving practical and logistical issues facing staff and students within my discipline. This work has taken place primarily through collaborative curriculum design, face-to-face teaching and active involvement in discipline-
based organisations. I am interested in practice and the theory of practice and how these ontological categories interact. I am committed to examining how experience can be improved through actions, activities, making and doing.

At the centre of my teaching approach is a deeply held belief in the personal and cultural transformational potential of higher education. This transformational value is particularly true for students who come from low socio-economic and first-in-family backgrounds, and takes place at both the individual and the broader societal level. I believe equitable access to higher education provides individuals with a broader range of life and career choices and can facilitate deeper connections to the world. Additionally, I fundamentally believe that education promotes tolerance and understanding. These are beliefs that are born from my own life experience. As the child of working class parents I am the first in my family to finish high school, the first to go to university and the first to complete postgraduate study. I have experienced first-hand how my educational advantage has provided opportunities unobtainable to other members of my immediate and extended family. My work within higher education and within community media has similarly been driven by these values. I work hard to ensure my students have access to authentic, transformative experiences that challenge their preconceived ideas, connect with their innate creativity and enable them to see how fortunate most of us are to be living in Australia at this time, and that with these privileges come responsibility and ethical obligations.

These values also drive my relationship to teaching within my specific discipline of media production. Although access to the means of media production has shifted dramatically in the past two decades, it still remains a place of privilege unobtainable for the majority of the world’s citizens. My personal and political values of inclusion and equity infuse the implicit and explicit tone of my teaching, and I see it as my duty to encourage students to examine their own innate motivations and what they wish to stand for. Alongside these discussions, I structure my classes in such a way as to directly address the responsibilities that come with a career in such an influential profession. These discussions are represented in my curriculum design through the mechanisms of lecture content; whom I select as invited guest speakers; the readings I set; the requirements of the assessment tasks; and, in particular, the reflective criteria they are asked to respond to.

I am committed to the political agenda of ‘subverting from within’ as one of the most effective forms of influence. This commitment can be traced to my exposure
to feminist and postcolonial ideology as an undergraduate student, my work within community broadcasting and my membership of progressive political parties. When presented with a scenario that requires intervention, I often feel compelled to ensure I have done as much as I can within my sphere of influence to improve the situation.¹

I am also deeply attracted to systems, taxonomies and ontological categories, and have an interest in how these can inform systematic change. I am increasingly aware of the extent to which the words ‘we need a system’ enters my everyday parlance. Systems, models and frameworks situate my understanding of how and why things operate, and help me to appreciate the relationships between different concepts and perspectives. In turn this helps me recognise where it is possible to intervene to either add value or advocate for change. With these attributes in mind, I argue that the project at the centre of this PhD has produced a new framework in which to now situate my practice as a media educator. However, I would also argue it is far more than that. The project offers a model for individuals, working groups within the university and the broader academic community to understand how the activation of a sense of belonging can work to unify many of the competing requirements of the contemporary tertiary curriculum. The methodological approach I have selected for this research is similarly value driven and is dependent on its proponents clearly articulating the values that drive them. I consider myself fortunate that throughout my career as an educator I have been able to maintain a clear sense of the principles that drive me. There is no doubt these values have been challenged at times, but possessing them has provided a consistent compass to help navigate the often conflicting demands of this ever-changing sector.

THE PROJECT

I began my PhD research examining contemporary moving-image digital archiving practice. This research centred around the question: How might an ongoing archive produce a sense of disciplinary belonging for screen production graduates? However, although two projects were initiated through the course of my doctoral enquiry, this dissertation focuses primarily on The Belonging Project (2009 – 2015) with occasional reference to The ASPERA Online Archive project (2008 – ongoing). Both projects have their genesis in my everyday practice as a media academic and reflect my guiding teaching philosophy emerging from my ¹ The aforementioned ideologies also ask me to examine the inherent bias and privilege within any given scenario and this, in turn, informs any action I may or may not take.
distinct disciplinary background. They are also informed by my concern for a sustained sense of belonging and the importance of history.

The ASPERA Online Archive is conceived as an accessible online digital archive to contain, curate and preserve the screen-based production work of both students and staff of ASPERA members. The Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) is the peak discipline body representing higher education programs that devote at least 30% of their curriculum to the teaching of screen production. Considerable work was conducted in the early stages of my doctoral research on this project, including a published article, and it remains viable with regular ongoing discussions among key institutional stakeholders. However, my work on the archive project reduced as The Belonging Project began to attract considerable funding.

It must be said, the story of The ASPERA Online Archive Project, in terms of its role within this PhD, is a truncated one. The project remains an active idea but is not yet a reality. It is important to note that I have not given up on the project but, given its national ambitions, a project of this nature requires significant infrastructure investment and a well-resourced project team to bring it to reality. These plans are still very much alive and I am looking forward to resuming this work on completion of my doctorate. As the discussion unfolds, it will become clear that one of the main reasons The ASPERA Online Archive Project has not been brought to full fruition during my candidature is my lack of experience in leading a large-scale, multifaceted project.

Yet it is through my research on The Belonging Project and by undertaking the reflection required within practitioner-led action research that I have come to understand the extent to which these projects are inextricably linked in their ambitions to activate a longitudinal sense of belonging for students as they intersect with the institution at different points in their student and graduate journey.

Another aspect linking these projects is their deeply collaborative nature. Both projects promote and are highly dependent on collaboration in order to operate. The professional and disciplinary contexts in which the projects reside rely extensively on multiple forms of collaboration and the scale of each project means they are only possible through working with others. Each project aims to provide a simple, elegant, overarching model that addresses the complex set of interrelated issues facing higher education institutions. These models are designed to enable staff and students to readily visualise how their work contributes to meaningful
learning environments particularly, within their specific disciplinary learning contexts.

The projects promote a sense of belonging at vastly different stages of the student lifecycle. The Belonging Project is designed to begin once students receive their letter of offer for a place within a degree at RMIT University and essentially ends at graduation, whereas the Archive project begins as students complete their first assessment tasks within their screen production units and is designed to archive their work and maintain their connection to the discipline indefinitely.

The Belonging Project is thus a collaborative, longitudinal, student engagement project that took place in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University from 2011 to 2015. The project has completed a four-year pilot and is currently being adapted for broader implementation throughout the whole of RMIT University. Throughout the dissertation, most references to The Belonging Project refer to this pilot phase.

The project consisted of four phases, detailed in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>What we did</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1:</strong> &lt;br&gt;Planting the Seeds 2011</td>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>Literature review, sector best practice mapping and application to school, testing of The Belonging Project Model, and development of first year experience initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong> &lt;br&gt;Focus on the First Year Experience 2012</td>
<td>Tier One: Disciplinary</td>
<td>Implementation and testing of the first year experience initiatives: Coordinated Orientation Week Activities; Cohort Day Out; Student Informal Spaces; Academic Transition Initiatives, and End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 3:</strong> &lt;br&gt;Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience 2013</td>
<td>Tier Two: Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>Development of a model of interdisciplinary practice and continued evaluation of the first year experience initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 4:</strong> &lt;br&gt;The Global At Home: At Home in the Global 2014</td>
<td>Tier Three: Global</td>
<td>Development of a three-stage approach testing the development of global competencies through case study initiatives, and continued maintenance of academic output of the disciplinary and interdisciplinary tiers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The four phases of The Belonging Project (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p15)
The artefacts I include for examination are:

1. An overview report

2. Four annual reports generated by the project
   b. *Report 2012: Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience*

3. Two peer-reviewed journal articles

4. Three peer-reviewed conference papers

THE BELONGING PROJECT’S RESEARCH TEAM

The collaborative research team that worked on the The Belonging Project underwent a series of changes throughout the process, with my colleague Bronwyn Clarke and myself as the only constants. These changes occurred purely as a result of shifting priorities and changing job descriptions for each individual. All team members remain deeply connected to the ongoing project and work in a variety of ways to continue to build an ethos of belonging within the organisation. There have been three academic team leaders Bronwyn Clarke, Associate Professor David Carlin and myself, two research assistants, Dr Lucy Morieson and Dr Natalie Araújo and two project officers, Karli Lukas and Laetitia Shand. More information about the project team can be found at the beginning of the overview report (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, pii).

Given the intensely collaborative nature of this project, I would like to clarify how the frequent use of ‘we’/‘our’ versus ‘I’ throughout this dissertation operates. The Belonging Project first emerged through a particular discussion between myself and David Carlin in 2010 (Carlin, Clarke, Wilson, Lukas & Morieson, 2012, p11). Soon after, we gathered a series of other key collaborators. Although I am able to trace the origins of a number of the ideas within the project to my own specific pedagogical concerns, once they have been shared within a collaborative environment ideas shift, change and subsequently became the collective property of the project. Thus throughout the following discussion ‘we’ and ‘our’ represent the various members of The Belonging Project’s key team and ‘I’ refers to my individual understanding and knowledge claims.

In essence The Belonging Project is the case study through which I have developed, tested, honed and activated my specific understanding of the theoretical concept of belonging. Yet it is through my extensive and ongoing conversations with Bronwyn (and to a lesser extent David, Natalie and Karli) that a specific understanding of belonging has developed. The complexity of this type of collaborative practice can be seen most acutely in the writing of the project’s final report, The Ethos of Belonging: A narrative model approach to student engagement 2011 – 2015, which Bronwyn and I wrote together as I was simultaneously refining this dissertation. As my individual research in the different theoretical approaches to belonging grew, this informed the quotes and the language we used in the overview report.
WHY THIS PROJECT

While my doctoral research journey began with The ASPERA Online Archive project, it is through my work on the Belonging Project that I have come to understand the extent to which both projects are informed by the same overriding principles and values. Through working on both projects, I have discovered a number of proactive ways to produce agency for myself (and other university staff) to counteract the discourses of neoliberal compliance dominant within contemporary academic life in Australia. Each project represents my attempt to work within established systems to design efficient and effective frameworks, based on proven conceptual models, for use by university staff concerned with the student experience.

As mentioned above, both projects actively promote (and are highly dependent on) collaborative teams in order to operate. The sheer scale of each project means they can only happen through working with others. Collaboration is an essential skill set within my specific disciplinary context and I have found that over time its methods and procedures have become naturalised and unconscious in terms of how I operate professionally. It is through reflection that I have come to realise just how deeply all aspects of my practice as an academic rely on different types of collaborative relationships and the extent to which they have come to define the very essence of my academic practice.

The projects also illustrate how the activation of a sense of belonging can be applied and scaled in a variety of institutional contexts and at different times within the student experience. The Belonging Project was originally designed to operate locally and to be applicable within small to large academic units. This contrasts with The ASPERA Online Archive, which is national and multi-institutional in scope. What binds these projects is the positioning of practice and action at the heart of problem solving and community building. The projects demonstrate that it is important to provide not only opportunities to students to help them learn how to belong to a disciplinary practice, but also the infrastructure to maintain these relationships and identities over time.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The projects have taken place within a contemporary urban university in Melbourne, Australia. Currently Australia has 43 accredited universities, 40 of which are funded publicly and all of which are governed by federal government legislation. Government policy as it relates to higher education in Australia is a
highly contested site for the two major political parties, with radical changes to how it is regulated and funded occurring regularly. In overall terms, the Australian Federal Government’s spending in the higher education sector as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the third lowest among OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries (Tiffen, 2015). This long-term downward trend in base student funding has resulted in the consistent tightening of university budgets, increases in class sizes and dramatic shifts in the ways in which universities operate as institutions. This is a trend experienced across many of the world’s advanced economies.

In recent years, the biggest shifts to Australian higher education policy have come as a result of the Review of Australian Higher Education (commonly referred to as the Bradley Review) handed down by the then Labor Government in 2008. This review was coupled with the introduction of a new Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The Bradley Review, prepared by an expert panel chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, AC, called for a suite of reforms across the higher education sector and argued for the setting of ambitious targets in terms of the number of 25 – 34-year-olds who will complete bachelor qualifications by 2020. In particular, there were significant increases in the targets around the number of students from low socio-economic and first-in-family backgrounds to be enrolled in higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008, pxviii). The release of the review highlighted the need for Australian universities to ensure they not only attract students from a range of backgrounds, but keep them enrolled, with significant funding allocated to ensure they do so. The AQF has resulted in a new set of reporting and compliance expectations for all higher education providers (including private providers), resulting in a large body of work undertaken by all providers as they align post-secondary offerings to the new framework.

These shifts within the Australian context are mirrored in higher education policy in both Europe and North America and point to an ongoing, rigorously contested debate about the role of the contemporary university and the roles and shifts in what is expected of academics. The growing regimes of compliance and accountability, the shifting of resources to a growing middle management and the changes in language signifying a shift from the ‘student’ to the ‘client’ have all been examined in detail (Gill, 2009; Hill & Kumar, (Eds.), 2009; Thornton, 2014; Whelan, 2015; and Gupta, Habjan & Tutek (Eds.), 2016). Over the past 25 years I have both witnessed and been subjected to these changes, first as a student and then as an academic staff member. My strategy for dealing with the challenges to my personal value system imposed by these shifts has been to consider
what direct action I could take in helping to create counter-narratives where the transformational potential of higher education for the student and our culture is once again central.

My understanding of the transformational potential of education is based on the traditionally liberal concept of university education enabling the development of critical, intellectual, and theoretically and ethically engaged citizenship, as opposed to economically driven perspectives primarily oriented towards servicing a global workforce. As Arthur Chickering argues, our perceptions of universities have shifted and higher education has ‘come to be perceived as a private benefit rather than as a public good worthy of tax support’ (Chickering, 2006a, p27).

Although I work within a university of applied learning and operate in a discipline that values making and practice, there is a ‘big difference between preparing for a job and for preparing for a satisfying and productive career’ (p28).

As evidenced by the many organisations and publications devoted to the importance of the scholarship of tertiary learning and teaching as a discipline in and of itself, my desire to ensure these values are repositioned at the centre of the operational culture of universities (rather than merely existing in the marketing material produced in the recruitment of students) is shared by many in the sector. Among my strongest influences, as I have contemplated these values, has been the work of British academic Carolin Kreber and American academic Arthur Chickering, both of whose work centres on encouraging authentic relationships between staff and students within universities. In Australia, the work of Sally Kift, Karen Nelson and Marcia Devlin has helped me to understand what is unique about Australian institutions and what is required to maintain the commitment for systemic change. As stated in the Bradley Review, ‘universities lie at the heart of the national strategy for research and innovation - itself a critical foundation of our response to a globalised world’ (Bradley et al. 2008, pxii). Universities are unique in their ability to shape a civil society where the expression of social justice, participation and success is possible irrespective of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, age and disability. The research of this doctorate is my attempt to produce some personal agency within this agenda.

As a dual sector tertiary institution, RMIT is one of Australia’s largest universities, with campuses in Australia, Vietnam and Spain. The University offers programs from certificate courses within the Vocational Education space, and bachelor’s degrees, honours, graduate diplomas, master’s degrees and PhDs within the higher education section. In Melbourne there are close to 60,000 students enrolled
and the institution employs approximately 5000 academic staff. There are three main academic colleges, the College of Business, College of Design and Social Context (DSC) and College of Science Engineering and Health (SEH). RMIT currently has 17 separate schools. The Belonging Project took place in the then largest school in the University in terms of academic staff and student load. The School of Media and Communication employs over 200 ongoing academic and professional staff and 700 sessional academics, with up to 6000 students enrolled at any one time across both sectors. In overall terms 2385 students directly participated, 3500 students indirectly participated and 313 staff (academic and professional) participated directly in The Belonging Project during its five years of direct operation (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p11).

The Research Questions

As is commonly the case with practitioner-led action research, the research objectives driving my project work have shifted and evolved over time, vacillating between logistical and operational concerns to broader philosophical issues questioning the role and practice of higher education more generally.

The idea that belonging can act as a theoretical concept well suited to tertiary education contexts has emerged gradually throughout my doctoral research. This process of discovery is the result of the project work, extensive collaboration, the research for this dissertation, and sustained reflection and interrogation of my values, motivations and practices.

Ultimately it was my ongoing interest in examining my own practice as an educator and my desire to facilitate long lasting authentic transformational learning experiences for my students that emerged as the specific lens through which I have examined my research practices.

The central research question that has defined and structured this enquiry is:

**How can the concept of belonging be used to help situate and activate my practice as tertiary academic within the contemporary university?**

A subsequent question that has influenced my research is:

**What strategies can be adopted by staff and student to activate and maintain a sense of belonging within higher education contexts?**
Methodology and methods

INTRODUCTION TO THE KEY TERMS

The research conducted for this doctorate utilises a practitioner-led action research methodology often used in the study of learning and teaching scholarship within higher education. As Ilene Wasserman and Kathy Kram point out in their 2009 article ‘Enacting the Scholar-Practitioner Role: An Exploration of Narratives’:

There are many terms used to describe those practitioners who participate in scholarly pursuits, including ‘researcher-practitioners’ (Lynham, 2002), ‘scientist-practitioners’ (Brewerton & Millward, 2001), ‘scholar-practitioners’ (Graham & Kormanik, 2004), ‘practitioner-theorists’ (Lynham, 2002), ‘scholarly practitioners’ (Ruona, 1999), and ‘reflective practitioners’ (Jacobs, 1999: Schön, 1983) (p13).

The terms ‘insider researcher’ (Drake & Heath, 2010) and ‘practitioner enquiry’ (Baumfield, Hall & Wall, 2012) are also regularly used within this context.

In defining my approach, I found the definition supplied by Charles McClintock in his entry ‘Scholar Practitioner Model’ in the Encyclopedia of Distributed Learning (Distefano, Rudestam & Silverman, 2004) to be particularly useful:

The term scholar practitioner expresses an ideal of professional excellence grounded in theory and research, informed by experiential knowledge, and motivated by personal values, political commitments, and ethical conduct. Scholar practitioners are committed to the well-being of clients and colleagues, to learning new ways of being effective, and to conceptualizing their work in relation to broader organizational, community, political, and cultural contexts. Scholar practitioners explicitly reflect on and assess the impact of their work. Their professional activities and the knowledge they develop are based on collaborative and relational learning through active exchange within communities of practice and scholarship (p393).

Among the attributes that drew me to this methodological approach are the formal recognition of experiential, intuitive and tacit knowledge; and the expectation that individual researchers must examine the personal politics and values driving their work; together with the ability to incorporate and take account of collaborative working methods. Also of importance are the methodology’s historical links to feminist perspectives. Many of the motivations for this type of research can be directly connected to social reconstruction (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, p.300), fitting
neatly within the longstanding feminist adage ‘the personal is political’ (Noffke, 2009, p8).

As I argue throughout this dissertation, my choice of research topic and, research methodology and the research outcomes have been motivated by, and deeply reflect, my personal and political values and my strong commitment to collaborative and relational learning.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL ORIGINS OF THE APPROACH

Practitioner-led action research began to emerge as a recognisable methodology in its own right in the late 1960s and is described in the literature as a subset of the broader term ‘action research’ (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001; Fox, Martin & Green, 2007; Wasserman & Kram, 2009). Throughout its relatively short history, action research has taken many forms and is practised across a range of disciplines. It has proven particularly popular in the disciplines of social sciences, health and education. As a paradigm of social enquiry, its primary aim has always been to bridge the gap between theory and embodied professional practice and to solve problems faced every day by practitioners in order ‘to improve the quality of life in social settings’ (McKernan, 1991, p3).

One of the earliest, and most influential, proponents of this new approach to scholarship was philosopher Donald Schö́n, who laid much of the groundwork in his landmark 1983 book The Reflective Practitioner. As pointed out by Jean McNiff in her book on action research, Schö́n called for a more inclusive definition of what can be counted as legitimate scholarship by arguing that:

the practical theories of practitioners are the most powerful and appropriate forms for dealing with contemporary social issues; and these are located in and generated from everyday practices (McNiff, 2013, p4).

In making the many embedded implicit practices of professionals explicit, and therefore able to constitute a new epistemological category privileging practical knowledge, Schö́n advocated for the development of deliberate systems for reflection-in-action (Schö́n, 1983, p69). Schö́n argued that practitioner researchers must devise a way to generate personal theories of practice that demonstrate processes of ‘self monitoring, evaluation of of practice, purposeful action’ and to make these processes public in order to benefit the profession and public (McNiff, 2013, p4).
In his 1999 book *The Practitioner-Researcher*, Peter Jarvis outlines a number of reasons practitioners/professionals began seeking more formal recognition when undertaking their own research. The shift towards formal recognition of tacit professional knowledge coincided with significant changes in how research is practised in and out of the academy. He argues that as a result of technological and conceptual developments, very few practitioners perform the work they had originally trained for leading to a need to reexamine the nature of the professions (p3). However, more importantly, its growth in popularity has come to represent a fundamental shift in the way knowledge is legitimised across society, the questioning of the status of high theory, and changes in management practices requiring more precise data on which to base significant institutional decisions (p3).

Carol Costley, Paul Gibbs and Geoffrey Elliot in their 2010 book *Doing Work Based Research* outline a number of additional drivers within the higher education sector for the growth in popularity of practitioner-led research. As the concept of the global knowledge economy emerged, foreshadowing shifts in the way in which higher education operates (massification, accountability, privatisation, marketisation and increased participation), universities have moved away from the notion of a ‘republic of scholars to a stakeholder organization’ within nation-state economies (pxiv). This has meant that to educational institutions have had to adapt to training for a more competitive world, leading to an increased expectation from the wider population that academia will be more directly relevant to the lived reality of everyday lives and specifically to work (pxvi). As these new ideas about the role of the university have circulated, new multi-disciplinary approaches to knowledge and inter-professional approaches to teaching for the professions have also been required, and ‘practitioner-led research and development has emerged as a principal means of developing organizational learning and enhancing the effectiveness of individuals at work’ (Costley et al. pxvi).

In describing the origins of these epistemological shifts in knowledge production, McNiff points to the work of Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow (1994) who first proposed the categories of ‘Mode 1’ and ‘Mode 2’ forms of knowledge (McNiff, 2013, p3). Drake and Heath (2013), Kreber (2013) and Costley et al (2010) also refer to Gibbons et al. work as a seminal moment in the advocacy for additional knowledge systems within Western universities. Gibbons et al. argue that Mode 1 knowledge is the traditionally dominant mode of knowledge produced and privileged within the Western academy and can be defined as more abstract, theoretical and propositional (Drake & Heath, 2011, p73), whereas Mode 2
knowledge is often produced by practitioners working outside the academy (p73). In contrast, Mode 2 knowledge tends to be practice-based, using critical reflection as the main method to produce trans-disciplinary knowledge (p73). Although this classification of knowledge has been critiqued as reductionist and problematically dialectical (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008), I have found Gibbons et al. work useful in helping me to understand how different knowledge systems are constructed using different methodological approaches.

Much of the work in establishing and defining practitioner-led action research has emerged from within the discipline of education. Perhaps the most influential contribution in the push for legitimisation of practitioner-led research in academic contexts is Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered*. In this work, Boyer argues for an expansion in the definition of academic work from one that is dominated by a basic research focus to one where the concept of scholarship is more inclusive of teaching and learning:

Surely, scholarship means engaging in original research. But the work of the scholar also means stepping back from one’s investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one’s knowledge effectively to students. Specifically, we conclude that the work of the professoriate might be thought of as having four separate, yet overlapping, functions. These are: the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990, p16).

When considering practitioner-led action research’s relationship to education, the work of Jean McNiff (with her occasional co-author Jack Whitehead) is commonly cited (Jarvis 1999; Noffke and Somekh 2009; Drake & Heath 2011; Gibbs, Cartney, Wilkinson, Parkinson, et al. 2016). McNiff’s clear and honest account of her shifting relationship to the methodology helped me understand many of the philosophical underpinnings of the approach and her advice on how the approach is best applied proved very useful. Through a number of books (including multiple editions of each), McNiff has passionately advocated the case for action research since 1988 (McNiff, 2013, p1) and argues that, although the methodology has undergone many iterations over the years, alongside ‘reflective practice’ it is now considered a mainstream research practice (p6).

For all its benefits, there are ongoing debates among supporters of the approach and from my reading it appears that a number of factions have emerged. Most vocal are the advocates arguing that some researchers do not pay due
consideration to the radical and emancipatory ethos underpinning the approach, thereby undermining its potential to really change ongoing practice (McNiff, 2013, p190). However, my particular difficulties with the approach are reflected in the longstanding and ongoing debates surrounding its legitimacy in relation to the aforementioned Mode 1 research. As McNiff points out, it is too easy for the approach to become loose from its research moorings and it ‘is often domesticated into merely “telling stories”’ (McNiff, 2013, p6). One of the reasons it has taken me so long to come to accept practitioner-led action research as a legitimate methodology can be traced to my own normalised and superficial understanding of the approach. Although I was exposed to action research early as an undergraduate student, I had never needed to examine its philosophical and ethical underpinnings and consequently failed to fully appreciate the exact nature of knowledge and theory production it argues for.

CLAIMS TO KNOWLEDGE, VALIDITY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

It has also taken me a long time to fully understand how new knowledge is created within the approach. As is the case for many doctoral candidates, I have struggled to fully accept any right I had to make knowledge claims that contribute to new ‘theories’ through critical reflection on my practice. Although critical reflection sits at the heart of this methodological approach, confusion about what actually constitutes critical reflection, and how to monitor or evaluate my own efforts in this, were the source of a great deal of confusion.

As I struggled with these issues, I was able to maintain confidence in the usefulness of the project work, witnessing first-hand how helpful it has been to my students and colleagues. Through writing this dissertation, I have finally come to understand how critical reflection can produce theory claims from project work. A breakthrough moment occurred when reading the chapter ‘Questioning Knowledge Claims’ by Carolin Kreber in her 2013 book Authenticity in and Through Teaching in Higher Education. In this chapter Kreber addresses a number of the specific anxieties I had been experiencing by comparing teacher-practitioner led enquiry to theory generation in the humanities:

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2 In conducting research into the pedigree of this methodological approach, it was interesting for me to discover that a great deal of the preliminary work leading to its acceptance within the academy took place in the late 1980s at Deakin University through the scholarship of Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001; Noffke & Somekh, 2009; McNiff, 2013). I believe this is worth mentioning as I undertook my Bachelor of Education in secondary teaching at Deakin University in the early 1990s and was exposed to the methodology early and had always assumed it was a mainstream approach to knowledge generation.
In the humanities theories are often not empirically testable in the way they are in the sciences. Theories in the humanities are largely based on conceptual analysis or ‘ideas’ rather than ‘research’ in the traditional sense, where ideas (or rather ‘hypotheses’) require empirical substantiation in order to be deemed valid … theories of higher education pedagogy that are grounded in philosophical inquiry, for example, the capabilities approach to higher education (e.g. Walker, 2006) or the concept of authentic being (e.g. Barnett, 2004a,b: 2007), can inform teaching and learning in higher education just as usefully as can empirical research findings in the field of psychology. (Kreber, 2013, p110)

In terms of my internalised pressure to contribute to original knowledge, McNiff and Whitehead make a salient point in Doing and Writing Action Research (2009) that action researchers are fully entitled to make informed, if limited, claims to knowledge/theory in their fields:

The claim you make through doing action research is that you have improved your practice … Your claim is original because no one else has improved your practice, so no one else has made the claim before (p43).

I am aware that this statement may appear conveniently simplistic; however, until I came across it I struggled to understand that it was perfectly legitimate to claim improved practice as a justifiable PhD outcome. McNiff and Whitehead argue that these claims can be framed in terms of a) an improvement in knowledge; b) an improvement in skills; and c) an improvement in research capacity (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009, pp44–45). They argue that if researchers can support all of these categories with evidence, then it is reasonable to claim they are making an original contribution to knowledge within a field. Once I discovered these parameters, I found much of the anxiety I had been experiencing around producing something grand and even profound in terms of an original contribution to knowledge within my discipline was reduced. I now have greater capacity to understand the nature of my contribution to my university and the field.

I have been genuinely surprised that it took me so long to reach these lightbulb moments. I had deliberately selected an area of research that complemented my day-to-day professional work and, as a student of the 1990s dominated by post-structuralism, have never subscribed to the idea of the grand author. Although I never expected to make a paradigm-shifting discovery in my PhD, I have always hoped that I could make a helpful, concrete contribution to the field. Therefore it was not until I ‘got it’ in this deceptively prosaic way that I realised the conceptual
block I had been experiencing was the result of internalised unconscious pressure I had been applying to myself. I also realised that these conceptual breakthroughs constitute a significant aspect of the ‘doctoral project’ for most candidates. The ability to ‘own’ your own work and to understand its limits within the context of your selected methodological approach is as much the work of this PhD as is the project also submitted for examination. As Drake and Heath (2011) point out:

new knowledge is necessarily unique, and ... this uniqueness arises out of any combination of several or indeed all of the following: research questions and findings; grounded methodological position; situated ethical position; changed perceptions of work through developing identity as a researcher (p101).

Linked to my struggle in developing my academic ‘voice’, I experienced similar trepidation in relation to the processes of validation prescribed within practitioner-led research methodology. I was worried that I was in no position to claim influence on others’ practice. However, as Kreber points out, despite the fact that many problem-based enquiries linked to teaching practice do not lead to formalised enquiries, some do. When written up formally, presented and communicated clearly, ‘such inquiries not only inform a larger audience but serve to motivate and inspire others to become engaged in similar types of projects’ (Kreber, 2013, p112). In other words, although often personal and local in nature, when practitioner-led research of this nature is presented in appropriate forums, it has the potential to directly influence and inspire many other educators by challenging them to examine their own practices and to apply particular interventions and ideas within their own institutional contexts and classrooms. As can be seen from the submitted publications and conference papers, we have deliberately engaged in formally communicating our findings to an academic audience. These outcomes contributed significantly to my growing confidence in the applied methodology and its systems for validation.

Critical reflection is one of the defining features of practitioner-led research, emerging from the constructivist model of experiential learning (Fenwick, p10) and Schön argues that professionals construct their ongoing knowledge through noticing, enquiring and experimenting with solutions (p10). He proposed that critical reflection is more than reflecting-in-action; and reflecting-on-action, it allows for practitioners to question their inherent bias in the way they framed the question in the first place (p10).
Influenced by Schön, American psychologist Jack Mezirow has continued the tradition of placing critical reflection at the heart of adult learning and his ‘Transformation Theory’ provides a particularly useful taxonomy of how reflection produces knowledge (Kreber, 2013, p114). In order to go beyond surface storytelling, Mezirow proposes that three levels of reflection are required, content reflection, process reflection and premise reflection, each with a distinct (although at times overlapping) function. Content reflection, refers to the ‘assumptions underlying how we define and describe a problem’ (Kreber, 2013, p113), process reflection asks us to consider ‘how we address or solve the problem’ (p113) and premise reflection is an opportunity to question ‘underlying core presuppositions’ (p113). Mezirow argues that it is only when core presuppositions are revised that transformational learning and subsequently changes in practice can occur (p116).

I conducted reflective practice throughout the doctorate in a range of ways. By far the most productive occurred during the many rigorous conversations and debates between The Belonging Projects team members. These conversations took place in a variety of formal and informal settings and were captured in meeting minutes; on copious amounts of butcher’s paper and sticky notes; within the annual reports, conference papers, and published articles. We decided early in the project’s life to dedicate considerable time and resources to producing comprehensive annual reports on each phase of the project (see project artefacts 2 a, b, c and d), although we were not formally required to do so. This decision has proven to be one of the great successes of the project. The accompanying project portfolio acts as a record of actions, and the discussions examine our underlying assumptions, outline our solutions to a range of problems and illustrate our revised practices on reflection (see Carlin, Clarke, Wilson, Lukas & Morieson, 2011, pp37–39 and p43; Wilson, Clarke, Carlin, Lukas & Morieson, 2012, pp44–46 and p54; Wilson, Clarke, Carlin, Araújo, Lukas & Shand, 2013, pp19–27; Clarke, Wilson & Araújo, 2015, pp36–39; and Clarke & Wilson, 2016).

PRACTITIONER-LED ACTION RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education has been a keen adopter of practitioner-led research and the number of how-to manuals continues to grow. Kenneth Zeichner and Susan Noffke’s 2001 chapter in the 4th edition of the Handbook of Research on Teaching (Richardson Ed. 2001) was one of the first to provide a succinct outline of the history of the approach and its uses in education. Noffke has continued to publish regularly in this area and in 2009 edited The SAGE Handbook of Educational Action Research with Bridget Somekh. The authors explore practitioner-led action
research through the categories of the professional, the personal and the political, arguing that this dimensional analysis:

offers a way to understand and thereby use action research as means not solely for knowledge generation (which as a form of research it entails), but for personal and professional development (for which as a form of learning it is used), and for contributions to social justice (which its articulation to social and social change demonstrates) (Noffke & Somekh, 2009, p21).

Highlighting the continuing growth of the approach throughout the world, most recently in Asia and Eastern Europe, the authors comment:

it fits well with growing interest in developing pedagogies which foster creativity, critical thinking and learning how to learn. In all these settings action research is a methodology exceptionally well suited to exploring, developing and sustaining change processes both in classrooms and whole organizations such as schools, colleges and university departments of education (Noffke & Somekh, 2009, p2).

The handbook demonstrates the diversity of ways the approach has been applied. It also demonstrates the politics inherent in educational ‘improvement’ (Noffke & Somekh, 2009, p525). Although the examples included in the handbook utilise a range of theories and data gathering methods, they are all ‘used to refine and reconstruct social situations through the core action research principle of praxis - action informed by knowledge and reflection’ (p524 [original emphasis]).

In January 2016 the journal *Educational Action Research* published a significant literature review on the use of action research methodology specifically in higher education contexts (Gibbs, Cartney, Wilkinson, Parkinson, Cunningham et al. 2016). Having reviewed 175 articles over a ten-year period, the authors found that action research in higher education tends to fall into two broad categories: ‘pedagogical research as a field of study; and teaching in the transmission and co-production of knowledge with students’ (p2). Within these two main categories, the authors highlight a series of sub-categories: action research and pedagogic research - social justice and emancipation; institutional development; curriculum development; pedagogies; teacher training; development of other professions; staff development; and action research focusing on student engagement (pp2-8).

The authors identify a number of studies where action research has been used in projects examining how to break down the institutional boundaries between teaching, research and administration to allow for new paradigms of
scholarship to emerge. The authors note that much of the reflection is based on Schön’s and Boyer’s work and that, while the the boundaries between teaching and research are ‘considerably blurred’ through action research, it still requires the establishment’s support to build interconnectivity (Gibbs et al. 2016, p3). Other barriers to institutional change noted by the study’s authors include procrastination, resistance to change and the perception that research into teaching was time-consuming given that staff had already completed their professional learning (p3).

As the authors point out, there are a number of limitations within the studies they examined. These limitations reflect critiques of the methodology listed previously and include: small cohort studies, making it difficult to generalise findings; a lack of reporting within some of the action research cycles; too much description of the reflective process; a general lack of ethical considerations; and lack of equal accreditation of academic versus practice based participants (Gibbs et al. 2016, pp7,8,11).

As the authors conclude, the shifts in higher education policy driven by the use of explicit student satisfaction metrics have created a need for ‘strong, practice-based evidence’ (Gibbs et al. 2016, p12). Action research ‘in higher education’s educational mission has become a central theme in research’ and is persuasive in theories of pedagogy and curriculum ‘and is a central tool in the development of institutional change’ (p12). Yet in the face of these trends towards greater compliance, action research retains its emancipatory traditions and continues to provide multi-disciplinary flexibility to examine the range of issues central to education (p12).

RESEARCH METHODS

Overall, The Belonging Project is the method through which I have examined and reflected upon my practice. However, as detailed in The Belonging Project’s annual reports (Carlin et al. 2011, p25; Wilson et al. 2012, p21; Wilson et al. 2013, p18; Clarke et al. 2015, p20) a large range of qualitative methods and limited quantitative methods were also utilised throughout the project’s four phases. The project utilised ethnographic observation, focus groups and interviews. Limited quantitative methods were deployed in gathering the demographic data required for an initiative that ran in Phase 4 The Data-Pack Initiative (Clarke et al. 2015, p25). However we were particularly reliant on narrative inquiry techniques in order to capture ‘social representation processes such as feelings, images, and time’ (Mitchell & Edudo, 2003, p4). This method was selected as it best suits the overall
goals of the project, is related directly to our disciplinary context and ‘offers the potential to address ambiguity, complexity, and dynamism of individual, group, and organisational phenomena’ (p4).

Given its inherently multidisciplinary approach, narrative inquiry has been gaining popularity beyond its humanitarian and literary roots for a number of years. Although it shares similar techniques to those utilised in ethnography and anthropology (where stories and first person accounts are used as description), narrative analysis uses stories to help in ‘transferring complex tacit knowledge’ and can serve as a source of implicit communication (Mitchell & Edudo, 2003, p1). Within organisational studies, ‘storytelling is the preferred sensemaking currency of human relationships among external stakeholders’ (Czarniawska, 2012, p385). Narrative methods are now commonly used within organisations undergoing change in order to help understand their culture and identity. Use of narrative and story techniques contributes to holistic understandings of an organisation and allows ‘individuals to reflect and reconstruct their personal, historical, and cultural experiences’ (Mitchell & Edudo, 2003, p5). Stories that are constructed and told within particular contexts can be used to promote certain values and ‘contribute to the construction of individual identity or concepts of community’ or, in other words, help activate and promote a sense of belonging (Mitchell & Edudo, 2003, p1).

Practitioner-led action research is also heavily reliant on narrative techniques. As McNiff points out, ‘the term itself [action research] may eventually be superseded or embedded within newer forms of research (it is already linked with narrative inquiry, appreciative inquiry and others)’ (McNiff, 2013, p72). As I point out within the introduction, story is the device through which I have been able to organise my thoughts and produce an account of my practice. In doing so I am able to ‘make sense’ of the project work and my role in order to communicate its contribution to new knowledge.

As referred to previously, another key methodology I have utilised throughout my research is collaboration. Jarvis makes a qualified plea for the value of collaboration in practice-led research by identifying a number of distinct benefits for genuine collaborative research. These include: the effects of practitioners’ tacit knowledge and habituation can be more easily revealed; discussion of how practitioners’ driving beliefs, values and emotions helps to provide a more complete image of the practitioners’ behaviour under investigation; validity is provided to the research as it ceases to be entirely anecdotal when corroborated
with others; gaps in individual practitioner memory can be addressed; and, most obviously, the work is shared, enabling larger problems to be researched (Jarvis, 1999, pp107–108).

Throughout the writing-up of this dissertation, I have spent a great deal of time contemplating how best to address the centrality of collaboration and collegiality within my research practice. I wanted to ensure I gave it its due recognition beyond simplistically dividing the work into convenient chunks of ‘I did this’ and ‘so and so did that’. As Janine O’Flynn points out in referencing Arthur Himmelmann:

*Collaboration* is distinctive as it involves a willingness of the parties to enhance one another’s capacity—helping the other to ‘be the best they can be’ (Himmelman 2002)—for mutual benefit and common purpose. In collaboration, the parties share risks, responsibilities and rewards, they invest substantial time, have high levels of trust and share common turf (O’Flynn, 2008, p186).

Many of the books and articles I have read in relation to practitioner-led action research discuss the tensions that may arise in relation to insider/outsider or colleague/student binaries (McNiff, 2013; Jarvis, 1999; Costley et al. 2010; Drake & Heath, 2011). Most commonly discussed is the uncertainty some researchers experience when their findings are critical of the organisation in which they work. Also discussed are the effects of power differences in collegiate relations if one person is ‘researching’ within a context and others are not. I feel extremely lucky that I did not experience any particular issues like these during my research. I believe this is the result of a set of unique institutional circumstances and established, respectful relationships within my immediate workplace. Also worth noting is that, during the time I have undertaken my research, the School has had a high number of ongoing academic staff also completing their doctorates, many of whom are researching their practice in one way or another. Many of my colleagues understood from first-hand experience the issues individual researchers face when also working fulltime and have been very sympathetic and supportive.

I am aware that my luck in working within a genuinely collaborative environment is not a universal experience for academics and I don’t believe it is overstating the case to say that genuine collaboration and collegiality are made more difficult within the contemporary neoliberal university’s management ethos of ‘autonomy and accountability’ (Sahlin, 2012, p198). As Kerstin Sahlin points out, ‘Collegiality is as much a culture of how work should be pursued as it is a structure for
planning, decision-making and follow-up’ (p221). Yet many contemporary management systems do not adequately facilitate or reward this type of genuine collaboration.

Contributing to this overall good will was the fact that the research we were undertaking was proving helpful to many colleagues. Throughout The Belonging, Project the team worked particularly hard to maintain regular contact with all school staff through a range of formal and informal communication strategies. On reflection, I have realised that I tended to be the author and sender of most of the emails inviting colleagues to meetings, workshops and presentations. This in turn also helped foster an encouraging and supportive environment.

Summary

As I have illustrated above, practice-led action research has many advocates across a range of disciplines. The approach continues to mount arguments for change through action and to position practical knowledge as a legitimate and valuable epistemological approach in and of itself. Those who fully embrace the action research agenda within social science have developed strict protocols for research design (favouring quantitative methods and statistical analysis) and tend towards a prescribed structure for the resulting reports. However, there are a number of smaller subsets of practitioner-led research within other disciplinary contexts exhibiting greater flexibility in research design, often placing more emphasis on qualitative methods such as thick description and narrative. Given my disciplinary background in the humanities, I found myself veering towards the later in writing this dissertation.

In concluding this section on methodology and methods, I would like once again to cite Drake and Health from their 2011 book *Practitioner Research at Doctoral Level* in which they discuss the particular issues faced by practitioner-researchers conducting doctoral research:

> Doctoral theses of practitioner researchers are required to make an ‘original’ contribution to knowledge. Our case is that a practitioner researcher will have engaged with new knowledge at all stages of the project, from conceptualisation, through methodology, methods and empirical work, to the thesis. We suggest that new knowledge derives from all these dimensions of the study and informs all aspects under consideration at each stage, and is both directly connected to undertaking
the project at all in a practice setting and unique to each researcher and their research (p2).

As I have indicated above, I have been able to maintain confidence in the project work I am presenting for examination having the potential to add significant value and change practices within my field for the better. The work undertaken within The Belonging Project continues to receive positive feedback from both within the University and across the sector more broadly. I was drawn to practitioner-led action research as I have described it for a number of reasons, the most important being my commitment to enacting meaningful, value-led change within my immediate workplace and, secondly, my longstanding commitment to contributing to my field through practice-led action research.
CHAPTER 2

**Situate: Belonging as a Theoretical Framework**

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine how belonging is theoretically conceptualised within the literature and identify the characteristics that make it particularly well suited to tertiary education contexts. I begin with a discussion on the ways in which The Belonging Project reflects many of these attributes, yet is uniquely situated within the growing body of work within the field. At times within the text there will be some necessary discussion of The Belonging Project’s operational procedures, foreshadowing the discussion in Chapter 3 Activate. In order to avoid confusion, I suggest readers keep their copy of the overview document *The Ethos of Belonging: A narrative model approach to student engagement 2011–2015* close to hand.

I argue that the ubiquity of the use of the word ‘belonging’ in popular culture has resulted in it losing much of its specificity as a concept. Commonly a sense of belonging is thought to emerge through connections to groups, communities and places or locations. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that a sense of belonging is constructed through three major analytical facets:

> The first concerns social locations; the second relates to people’s identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings; and the third relates to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others’ belonging/s. These different facets are interrelated, but cannot be reduced to each other (Yuval-Davis, 2016, 370).

Belonging is often defined as a feeling of emotional attachment, of feeling ‘at home’ and of ‘feeling safe’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p197). More often than not ‘belonging is used, more or less consciously, as a synonym of identity, and in
particular national or ethnic identity’ (Antonsich, 2010, p644); other popular mainstream uses connect it to ideas of place or ‘territorial belonging’ or to cultural or religious groupings often answering the question ‘where do I belong?’ (p646).

However, within existing academic literature the concept is considerably more nuanced and multidimensional and its meaning is often dependent on the disciplinary lens within which it is being viewed. That said, it is generally agreed that the defining feature of the concept of belonging is its ‘personal, intimate, existential dimension’ (Antonsich, p647). Although the concept exhibits relational, autobiographical, cultural, economic, political and legal dimensions, it is most often experienced as a deeply personal, intrasubjective, and private emotional response, one that is highly dependent on an intersubjective experience involving other people (May, 2011, p370).

It is worth noting that we do not automatically feel a sense of belonging to a place, identity or group of people merely by being born in a certain location or within a particular cultural context rather, it is through action and ordinary regular interactions that a sense of belonging is constructed and maintained. Belonging is ‘built up and grows out of everyday practices’ (Antonsich, p645). Belonging also exhibits a political dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion relating to those who feel like they belong and those who feel they do not (Antonsich, p645), although the politics of belonging often involves two opposing sides and a process of negotiation is always in place ‘either at the individual or at the collective scale or both’ (p650). A sense of belonging is a dynamic concept that operates across many dimensions in a person’s life and as a result is fluid and susceptible to change at any time.

What the Literature Says About Belonging

As we discovered within our initial literature review for The Belonging Project:

In relation to theoretical notions of ‘belonging’ much of the literature resides within the domain of psychology (more specifically social psychology) and within the literature of inclusion and exclusion (Carlin et al. 2011, p18).

Belonging first came to prominence as a concept within the field of psychology when it appeared in the third tier, alongside love, in Abraham Maslow’s well-known Hierarchy of Needs published in 1954 (Maslow, 1954). In Maslow’s hierarchy, basic physiological needs such as hunger, sleep, breathing, safety, health and property take precedence and must be satisfied before belongingness
and love needs can emerge. Once the needs of belongingness and love are satisfied, esteem, achievement and self-actualisation, creativity and problem-solving needs emerge. Until belonging needs are gratified, these other needs (such as self-actualisation) ‘may become simply not-existent or be pushed to the background’ (p16). Within the field of psychology, belongingness is therefore most often discussed as a basic human need and conceptualised as a fundamental human motivation for behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p497).

In conceptualising the specific notion of belonging utilised within The Belonging Project, we were heavily influenced by Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary’s 1995 paper ‘The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation’ (Carlin et al. 2012, p18). The article puts forward and evaluates the hypothesis that ‘human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quality of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships’ and ‘that the need to belong is a powerful fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation’ (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p497). Through an extensive review of the literature surrounding belonging, the authors demonstrate how belongingness appears ‘to have multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and on cognitive processes’ (p497) and argue that failure to belong or ‘lack of attachments is linked to a variety of ill effects on health, adjustment, and well-being’ (p 497) consequently leading to feelings of ‘isolation, alienation, and loneliness’ (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi & Cummins, 2008. p213), concluding that much of what humans do is in the service of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p498).

Baumeister and Leary suggest that, in order to prove Maslow’s theory of belonging as a fundamental human motivation, the concept needs to meet the following seven criteria:

(a) produce effects readily under all but adverse conditions, (b) have affective consequences, (c) direct cognitive processing, (d) lead to ill effects (such as on health or adjustment) when thwarted, (e) elicit goal-oriented behavior designed to satisfy it (subject to motivational patterns such as object substitutability and satiation), (f) be universal in the sense of applying to all people, (g) not be derivative of other motives, (h) affect a broad variety of behaviors, and (i) have implications that go beyond immediate psychological functioning (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p498).

3 It is difficult to overestimate the influence this 30,000-word paper has had in the field. With close to 10,000 citations, it remains the single most influential work in establishing the case for the concept of belonging as ‘one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human behaviour’ (Baumeister & Leary, p522).
Arguing that an innate evolutionary drive ‘to form and maintain social bonds’ is the primary motivation for the need to create a sense of belonging, the authors highlight its ‘survival and reproductive benefits’ (p499). Competition for limited resources ‘provides a powerful stimulus’ to form strong interpersonal bonds and lone individuals are at a ‘severe disadvantage’ in competition with a group when both require the same resource (p499). The result of these evolutionary urges is a set of internal mechanisms that ‘stimulate learning by making positive social contact reinforcing and social deprivation punishing’ (p499).

Baumeister and Leary propose that belonging demonstrates two main features:

First, people need frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person. Ideally, these interactions would be affectively positive or pleasant, but it is mainly important that the majority be free from conflict and negative affect.

Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future (Baumeister & Leary, p500).

Baumeister and Leary also found that the literature supports the idea that ‘social bonds create a pattern in cognitive processing that gives priority to organizing information on the basis of the person with whom one has some sort of connection’ (p503). The authors point to a 1980 study by Linville and Jones that shows people tended to process information about people outside their group in black-and-white terms (p504). This contrasts to situations where similar information was supplied about members of their own group, which was processed in a more complex fashion. The authors found that ‘mere existence of a social bond leads to more complex (and sometimes more biased) information processing’, demonstrating the effects on cognition of belonging (p504).

Similarly, Baumeister and Leary found the literature supports the finding that a sense of belonging ‘can affect how people process information about nearly all categories of stimuli in the social world’ (p504). Studies indicate that popular ideas pertaining to ‘group mind’ are subverted when there are strong bonds among a group. Rather than all members thinking the same thing in the same way, it is far more advantageous to the group when each member is responsible for processing different information (p504):
transactive memory processes operate in close relationships and groups by assigning each person a significant category of expertise, with the result that each person becomes and expert in one or a few areas and simply consult other when alternative areas come up (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p504 [original emphasis]).

The benefits of a sense of belonging identified by the authors include the effect of ongoing strong bonds on self-interested behaviour. The authors discovered that once strong bonds are established, ‘even the mere anticipation of future interaction’ is enough to make group members come to each other’s aid by overriding self-interested patterns (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p519). They point out that group membership can foster a ‘sense of duty or obligation that can effectively override tendencies to engage in social loafing’ even if ‘individual contributions to the group will not be identified’ (p519).

Baumeister and Leary note that the absence of a sense of belonging has a series of adverse effects and can lead to the following issues:

Deprivation of stable, good relationships has been linked to a large array of aversive and pathological consequences. People who lack belongingness suffer higher levels of mental and physical illness and are relatively highly prone to a broad range of behavioral problems, ranging from traffic accidents to criminality to suicide (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p511).

As previously mentioned, The Belonging Project was heavily influenced by Baumeister and Leary’s findings and we used them in conceptualising our particular application of belonging. As identified by the authors, the defining features of pleasant, stable and long-term interactions are evidenced in the incremental and longitudinal ambitions of the The Belonging Project Narrative Model (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p13). Throughout The Belonging Project we focused on building an ethos of belonging where our students experienced frequent positive interactions with staff (and each other) within discipline, interdiscipline and global contexts across the entirety of their degree (p13).

Collaboration is a key threshold concept within the disciplines taught in the School of Media and Communication. As Baumeister and Leary suggest, activating a sense of belonging is extremely helpful in collaborative learning and teaching environments. Their research notes that, contrary to popular belief, close bonds between people can mean that people gravitate towards the things they are good at (rather than a homogenisation of skills), thereby adding to the capacity of
the group to achieve its goals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p505). If conceptualised this way, promoting and activating a sense of belonging in classroom contexts can complement and counteract some of the popular complaints of groupthink and social loafing occasionally levelled at this area of teaching.

We were also influenced by Gregory Walton, Geoffrey Cohen, David Cwir and Steven Spencer’s 2011 paper ‘Mere Belonging: The Power of Social Connections’. This was one of the first papers I located that applies the concept of belonging specifically within an educational context. Walton et al. argue that even minimal social connection to another person or group (mere belonging) affects important aspects of self (p1). Referencing longitudinal research in the field of education, they point out that ‘students who feel socially connected to peers and teachers are more motivated in school, even months and years later’ (p2). The study points to work by Aronson that ‘research on cooperative learning finds that structuring school assignments so that it is in the students best interest to cooperate rather than compete can increase cooperation and improve school outcomes’ (p17). In applying these notions to The Belonging Project we argued that ‘developing robust discipline and professional social connections whilst at university are vital life skills that contemporary universities are well positioned to help develop’ (Carlin et al. 2012, p18).

In 2013 Alyson Mahar, Virginie Cobigo and Heather Stuart completed a transdisciplinary literature review of belonging in order to develop a guide aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of programs for people with disabilities. After identifying over 8000 unique abstracts where the term ‘belonging’ appeared, they discovered that ‘saturation of definitions was reached after 40 articles’ (p1028). From the 21 articles that explicitly defined belonging, they summarise:

Sense of belonging was often referred to as a personal feeling or perception of an individual as they related to or interacted with others, a group, or a system that was separate from an individuals actions, behaviour or social participation. Feeling needed, important, integral, valued, respected or feeling in harmony with the group or system characterized most definitions of belonging (Mahar et al. 2013, p1029).

The authors identify five common themes that are present across the literature defining belonging, leading to a multidimensional understanding of the term. However, the authors note that these themes did not uniformly appear in all definitions and were often disciplinary and context dependent (Mahar et al. 2013, p1030). The five themes are: subjectivity ‘a sense of belonging is a perception
that is unique to the individual that centres on feelings of value, respect and fit’ (p1030); groundedness, a sense of belonging requires that a referent group exists to anchor the subjective feeling, ‘One belongs to something’ (p1030); reciprocity, the feelings of connectedness are shared between the individual and the referent; dynamism, a number of factors, both physical and social, can contribute to or detract from an individual’s sense of belonging and are subject to constant negotiation (p1031); and self-determination - individuals must have control over whom they choose to develop reciprocal relations with. As the authors point out, an individuals ability to make a decision in relation to whether they feel they belong is ‘an interesting intricacy of belongingness’ (p1031).

A number of other interesting points about belonging are also noted within the literature. Belonging is highly contextual, fluid and positioned as either passive or active experiences these aspects are noted within the literature, but not common enough to warrant a distinct category (Mahar et al. p1029). The authors also note that it is possible to experience multiple senses of belonging simultaneously across a range of referent groups, ‘with each situation encompassing a sense of belonging that is unique to that relationship’ (p1029). These simultaneous senses of belonging may conflict at times, which in turn may be internalised through a process of adaptation within certain settings or environments, leading to its characterisation as fluid or transitory (p1029).

As identified by Mahar et al., it is the element of self-determinism that I have found to be of most interest. The ability to choose to not belong within certain contexts is directly linked to points Yuval-Davis makes in relation to the politics of belonging. Often determined by systemic ‘power differentials resulting from historical discrimination, social roles, norms or institutional discrimination’, self-determinism or choice gives the individual control over whether they feel they can belong, versus whether they want to belong (Mahar et al. p1031). It also brings into question Baumeister and Leary’s position in relation to the universal need to belong. While it can be argued that a sense of belonging can be positioned as a universal need because it is evident across all cultures, it is difficult to categorically prove ‘that such a ‘need’ really exists’ (May, 2013, p80). Interestingly, although it seems to be a wide ranging review Mahar et al. do not refer directly to Baumeister and Leary’s work, although many of the five characteristics they identify clearly overlap with the dimensions defined by those authors.

Although the literature from social psychology is the predominant discipline that has contributed to my specific understanding of the term ‘belonging’, I have
also been drawn to how sociologists conceptualise it. Vanessa May’s 2013 book *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World* interrogates how belonging reflects, and can influence, social change. May tends to use belonging in place of identity, arguing that it offers a more nuanced opportunity to study the ‘intersectional theories of identity’ (p7) by allowing for a more complex understanding of identity beyond the prevailing rhetoric that often situates identity as singular (p8). For May, the concept of belonging is a succinct way to reflect on the complex relational self and she explains that ‘rather than the self being something innate, something we are born with, it emerges in relationships with and in relation to other people’ (2013, p4).

May takes the commonly held definition of belonging ‘as the process of creating a sense of identification with, or connection to, cultures, people, places and material objects’ and extends it by suggesting ‘that belonging acts as a kind of barometer for social change [and] significant changes in our surroundings are reflected in a fluctuation in our sense of belonging’ (May, 2013, p1). Its May’s argument for an understanding of belonging as an everyday practice, multidimensional and the result of dynamic processes that I have found most interesting (May, 2011, pp370–372). This suggests that many of the dynamics of belonging are largely unconscious and the feelings emerge as we go about our everyday lives, also confirming that we experience multiple senses of belonging simultaneously at any given time (p370).

In extending her ideas of belonging as multidimensional and multisensorial, May links them specifically to theories of space and place. Citing Máire Éithne O’Neill, May states ‘we come to know the world through our sensuous embodied experiences of touch, sound, smell and taste that help us achieve “a holistic way of understanding three-dimensional space” (O’Neill, 2001, p3)’ (May, 2011, p371). In applying Michel de Certeau’s work on the unconscious or tactical navigation of everyday life, May argues that we build a sense of belonging in the world by moving through it and engaging with it (p371). Belonging is not ‘something we accomplish once and for all’ but is dynamic and can depicted ‘as a trajectory through time and space (de Certeau, 1984)’ (p372). Belonging, she argues, ‘is something we have to keep achieving through an active process’ (p372).

These are the dimensions of belonging that I have found particularly compelling in formulating my own operational understanding of the concept, and they are reflected in the everyday iterative forms of belonging that The Belonging Project promotes. As we argue, it is not enough to offer strategies for cultivating a sense of belonging for students just within first year; rather we need to weave
opportunities to activate belonging continuously throughout their entire degree (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p1). Upon reflection I have also come to realise that the dimensions of belonging that I have personally been most active in promoting within The Belonging Project are particularly related to the students’ relationships to space and place.

At the end of Phase 1: Planting the Seeds in 2011, The Belonging Project had some unexpected funds available and in considering where we could make the most obvious difference to the student experience, it was decided to spend the money on refurbishing an underutilised informal student space. Although the School had recently moved to a new purpose-built building, the budget had run out before it was possible to complete a purposeful fit-out for the informal student space. Consequently the space was sparsely furnished, with a small number of tables and chairs, and vastly underutilised by the students. A decision was made to spend the spare funds on making the space more comfortable for students and in doing so create a central meeting spot for them. The initiative has affectionately become known as the SISI (Student Informal Space Initiative) and it is one of the initiatives that I took academic leadership on.

Since this initial fit-out there have been two more refurbishments of the space. The final one took place in late 2014 and constitutes one of the final acts signifying the end of the pilot phase of The Belonging Project (Clarke, Wilson & Araújo, 2015, p34). This initiative has proven to be among the most visible and popular of The Belonging Project’s interventions, and whereas the first fit-out was largely informal with only minimal interaction with the University’s Property Services division, the final refurbishment was substantially funded by the division, signalling a dramatic change in corporate culture in the intervening few years. Its progress into becoming a dynamic hub for the School has been documented in detail in our annual reports and we also produced a video available to be viewed here www.youtube.com/watch?v=qql5SEdwZPI (Wilson et al. 2013, p35).

4 We do feel it is possible for the project to take some minor credit for contributing to this cultural shift. Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) took a particular interest in this initiative and many campus tours of visiting dignitaries included this as a stop on their itinerary. The space also featured in a number of television advertisements for the university and in February 2013 Bronwyn and I were invited to give a presentation to the heads of Property Services about the renewed success of the space. Since this time the University has commenced a multi-million-dollar refurbishment of four major buildings, all of which include significantly more space for informal student interaction.
Throughout all the four phases of The Belonging Project, we worked to actively produce a sense of belonging through a range of measures including tactile and physical engagement within the dedicated informal space. Once established, we utilised a number strategies to ensure that students felt the space belonged to them (Wilson, Clarke, Carlin, Morieson & Lukas, 2013, p36). For example, we commissioned students to spraypaint the false walls, provided money for exhibitions, installed a microwave oven and vending machines, built more lockers, commissioned giant ‘welcome’ signs, and most popular of all, ensured the work tables were made from material that encourages self-expression through graffiti. The space remains a popular informal working environment for students.

NOT BELONGING

As alluded to throughout this chapter, belonging is often experienced as a binary: you either belong or you do not belong, through choice or exclusion. As mentioned previously Yuval-Davis is careful to offer a distinction between feelings of belonging and the ‘politics of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2016, p368) when she writes:

The politics of belonging involve not only the maintenance and the reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers (within and outside the community) but also their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents (p368).

Belonging is an emotional attachment and tends to be naturalised and part of everyday practices that only become obvious, ‘articulated, formally structured and politicised ... when ... threatened in some way’ (p370).

But it is May’s views on the idea of ‘not belonging’ that I have found to be the most interesting in thinking through the operational implications of this binary (May, 2011, p373). Unlike many writing on belonging, May suggests that a feeling of not belonging ‘need not always be experienced negatively’ (2011, p373). She argues that for many of us there is an ordinary tension ‘between wanting to be similar and to and belong with others, and wanting to be unique and different from others’ (p373). As she argues, it would be ‘too easy to say that we simply belong to a group and happily conform to its unwritten rules of behaviour’ (May, 2013, p87). In applying her idea of the relational self, she argues that this tension can indeed be productive when, through ‘the fractures or joins’ of our ideas of belonging, we are able to take note of our surroundings in new ways (2011, p373):
In other words, not belonging does not have to have purely negative consequences, just as belonging is not necessarily a positive thing or an ideal state. While some people are clearly prevented from belonging, others may resist belonging (May, 2013, p88).

As May points out, even while feeling a secure sense of belonging there is room for ambivalence (2013, p8). Using gender as an example she points out that it is possible to derive pleasure out of both belonging and not belonging. May expresses her pleasure in rejecting some conventions of femininity such as wearing skirts and high heels, while simultaneously experiencing ‘a deep sense of belonging to the category of ‘women’” (p87). A truly positive and robust environment of belonging allows for self-determination by allowing us to choose how we might wish to belong or not belong without too many negative consequences.

Throughout my work on The Belonging Project I have often thought about this aspect of belonging and the following incident immediately comes to mind. As the first year of the project came to an end, we presented our work-in-progress to our colleagues at the annual School leadership retreat. We began the session by asking participants to ‘tune into’ the topic of belonging by asking participants to share a one-minute narrative about their own experience of belonging (this could be at university or elsewhere in their lives). While most staff shared poignant anecdotes of belonging (their own or their children’s, if a parent) there were a couple of staff members who were ‘keen to point out that not everyone wants to belong, and that the ‘outsider’ perspective can be desirable and creatively productive for some’ (Carlin et al. 2012, p50).

The question ‘what if I don’t want to belong?’ is often asked when I first discuss the concept of belonging with others, and it is one that I can certainly appreciate. However, I believe the question belies a popular misconception of belonging, particularly when applied to higher education contexts. It is my contention based on my research and observations that people making an active decision about not wanting to belong make this choice from a particularly powerful position of agency. In order to make the choice of not wanting to belong in any given context we must possess a secure sense of self and the absence of any fear that this decision means one we might not be dangerously excised from the group for doing so. Or, to put it another way, that fundamental belonging needs are likely being met in another context and these are strong enough to extend across a range of contexts. As May points out, ‘not conforming’ is not the same as not
belonging (2013, p 87); ‘even in the midst of belonging we can feel ambivalent’ (p87). Furthermore, as May points out ‘even those people who resist dominant forms of belonging tend to seek some form of alternative belonging’ (p89 [original emphasis]).

Thinking through these ideas pertaining to not belonging has helped me to develop a richer understanding of what a sense of belonging is and what differentiates it from collective, homogenised ‘groupthink’. Indeed, if Baumeister and Leary’s findings are to be accepted, a sense of belonging leads to greater diversity within groups, as people are valued for the specific strengths and unique capacities they bring to the group. Similarly, if people are feeling secure in one aspect of their life, this can have beneficial effects in other facets providing a person with some agency in regards to choosing ‘not to belong’ in certain contexts. Of most relevance to The Belonging Project is the contention that belonging needs to be explicitly and regularly activated for it to have efficacy. This activation can take place in a variety of forms and contexts, but does not happen automatically through the accident of birth or social status.

As researcher Terrell Strayhorn reiterates in a TEDX talk from October 2012, belonging does not necessarily mean you must assimilate or acculturate but, rather:

a sense of belonging means we need to be alike enough, to share enough in common, to find community and in fact to celebrate that we are different and that those differences are not touted as deficiencies but in fact, celebrated as actual contributions to this beautiful community that we create today (Strayhorn 2012b).

### Belonging in Higher Education

I first became aware of the theoretical concept of belonging and its relevance to higher education when developing transition and orientation experiences for students in my role as a selection officer for the Bachelor of Communication (Media) program. In 2010, writing on the first year experience (FYE), Sally Kift, Karen Nelson and John Clarke published an article titled ‘Transition Pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector’. In this article the idea of belonging was referred to as one of the three principles driving Queensland University of Technology’s (QUT)\(^5\) innovative, whole-of-institution approach to the FYE.

\(^5\) QUT and in particular academics Sally Kift and Karen Nelson are credited with being the foremost researchers on the FYE in Australia. In 2009 Kift was awarded a prestigious Austra-
P1: The first year curriculum must engage new learners in their learning and mediate support for that learning. This is assisted by:

P2 Awareness of and timely access to QUT support services; and

P3 Creating a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experiences

(Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010 p4).

In developing these principles, Kift and Nelson reference the work of Kerri-Lee Krause, who in 2005 examined aspects of student engagement in the first year by asking the question ‘what is the evidence of engagement?’ According to Krause, there are five aspects of engagement that are readily evidenced and the notion of belonging appears within a discussion of number three: engaging with the institution (Krause, 2005a, p5). The remaining four aspects of engagement Krause identifies are: engaging through class contact and study; engaging online; engaging with peers; and engaging with academic staff (p5).

I make specific mention of these particular references for two reasons, firstly because I want to illustrate the almost accidental nature of how I stumbled on the concept. Secondly, I want to point out that, while the idea of belonging does make regular appearances within Australian higher education scholarship, it is inextricably linked to research on the FYE and first year retention. To date, I have yet to encounter any discussions of belonging beyond this narrow application within the Australian context. In contrast, we have deliberately extended the process of activating feelings of belonging in The Belonging Project to the entire student life cycle and beyond.

That said, over the last 25 years a sense of belonging within higher education research has emerged as a more substantial theoretical framework in the USA. The concept first appeared in the literature in the early 1990s in the work of Vincent Tinto and his theory of college persistence and retention, and Sylvia Hurtando and Deborah Carter’s work on Latino students’ experiences at college (Tinto, 1993; Hurtando & Carter, 1997). As Terrell Strayhorn points out, there are a number of streams of enquiry within the literature (Strayhorn, 2012a). First is the work that focuses on the circumstances that help to engender students belonging in schools, such as interactions with peers, support from teaching staff and the overall campus climate (Strayhorn, 2012a, p12). Secondly, there is research on the determinants of belonging, such as membership in clubs and societies, student
government and academic support programs, and finally there is a stream that focuses on background variables, such as social class and ethnicity (p13).

Work on belonging also took place in the UK under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the philanthropic Paul Hamlyn Foundation, with a final report on ‘What Works? Student Retention and Success: Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change’ (Thomas, 2012). Taking place over a four-year period 2008–2011, the program encompassed seven discrete projects involving 22 higher education institutions (p8). The definition of belonging adopted by the program is closely aligned with issues of academic and social engagement as discussed previously and likewise relies on both psychological and sociological traditions to inform a working definition. Thomas identifies the four main ways in which belonging was successfully nurtured throughout the projects as:

- supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; an HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals (pp14-15).

This last point, ‘experience that is relevant to interests and future goals’, is of particular interest in terms of The Belonging Project and our specific emphasis on establishing a sense of belonging within the disciplinary context. As we tacitly knew from our personal experience as students, our own long-term teaching experience and as confirmed through our research, students identify first with their disciplinary cohort and so it is vital to ensure any interventions designed to encourage belonging are targeted to engage students’ professional and disciplinary goals (Carlin et al. 2012, p31–33).

The projects Thomas describes within the report were primarily focused at the operational level and explicitly designed to improve student retention and success. Identical to The Belonging Project’s findings, Thomas found that, rather than identifying just one or two specific interventions to improve engagement and success, it was more important to nurture a culture of belonging across the institution (Thomas, 2012; Clarke & Wilson, 2016). At the end of her report Thomas delivers seven strategic recommendations, which I outline here, but will expand on in more detail within the second half of the dissertation:
1. The commitment to a culture of belonging should be explicit through institutional leadership in internal and external discourses and documentation such as the strategic plan, website, prospectus and all policies.

2. Nurturing belonging and improving retention and success should be a priority for all staff as a significant minority of students think about leaving, changes need to be mainstreamed to maximise the success of all students.

3. **Staff capacity** to nurture a culture of belonging needs to be developed. Staff-related policies need to be developed to ensure:

   - staff accountability for retention and success in their areas;
   - recognition of staff professionalism and contributions to improve retention and success in relation to time and expertise;
   - access to support and development resources as necessary;
   - appropriate reward for engaging and retaining students in higher education and maximising the success of all students.

4. **Student capacity** to engage and belong must be developed early through:

   - clear expectations, purpose and value of engaging and belonging;
   - development of skills to engage;
   - providing opportunities for interaction and engagement that all can participate in.

5. High quality institutional data should be available and used to identify departments, programmes and modules with higher rates of withdrawal, non-progression and non-completion.

6. Systems need to be in place to monitor student behaviour, particularly participation and performance, to identify students at risk of withdrawing, rather than relying on entry qualifications or other student entry characteristics. Action must be taken when ‘at risk’ behaviour is observed.

7. There needs to be a partnership between staff and students to review data and to understand the students’ experiences of belonging, retention and success. Change across the student life cycle and throughout the institution at all levels should be agreed and implemented and the impact evaluated (Thomas, 2012, pb69–70 [original emphasis]).
Given the size of the respective higher education sectors within the USA and the UK, it is not surprising that there are many more studies and projects that utilise the concept of belonging to promote student success, retention and engagement, when compared to Australia. However, what I have noticed is that they all appear to be limited to discrete marginal student cohorts, often based on ethnicity (black or Latino), gender, socio-economic status or first-year transitioning status (Hurto & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Ribera et al. 2015; Strayhorn, 2016), rather than adopting the whole-of-program (including the formal and informal curriculum) and entire student life cycle approach we took in The Belonging Project. Although Thomas advocates for a whole-of-institution approach to developing a culture of belonging, I have found it impossible to find any such examples within the literature on belonging. This aspect alone provides The Belonging Project with its uniqueness within the field. To my knowledge, this comprehensive approach to developing an ethos of belonging across all aspects of the student experience is yet to be implemented elsewhere.

**STRAYHORN’S THEORY OF COLLEGE BELONGING**

Strayhorn\(^6\) is probably the researcher who has made the most substantial recent contributions to the field, linking a sense of belonging to the transformative mission of higher education. Although his book *College Students’ Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students* was released in 2012, after The Belonging Project had already begun, I only recently discovered his research. In the book Strayhorn argues that belonging should be considered a discrete theoretical concept within higher education scholarship of learning of teaching, arguing that the concept’s direct relationship to cognition and ‘achievement motivation’ (p4) makes it a particularly useful theory to use in the domain of education.

Strayhorn is also heavily influenced by Baumeister and Leary’s work on belonging and consequently frames his definition and understanding of belonging as a ‘basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior’ (2012a, p3). In formulating his working definition of belonging, Strayhorn experienced difficulty in locating a single specific definition of belonging. In his definition, designed for specific use in higher education, he makes a special effort to distinguish it from concepts of involvement and engagement, arguing that these are two concepts that belonging is commonly confused with (p13):

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\(^6\) Strayhorn is Professor of Higher Education at Ohio State University and director of the Center for Higher Education Enterprise, and has written and lectured extensively on belonging in higher education in North America.
In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers) (p 17).

Through his extensive work in activating a sense of belonging across many projects, Strayhorn developed seven core elements of belonging for college students.

1. *Sense of belonging is a basic human need*...
2. *Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior*...
3. *Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts, ... (b) at certain times and, ... (c) amongst certain populations*...
4. *Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering*...
5. *Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging*...
6. *Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes*...
7. *Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change*...

(Strayhorn, 2012a, pp18–23 [original emphasis]).

The first two of Strayhorn’s core elements are directly linked to the work of Baumeister and Leary in establishing the legitimacy of these claims; however, I would like to take a bit of time to examine his analysis in relation to core elements 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

*Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts,* such as being a newcomer to an otherwise established group, *(b) at certain times,* such as (late) adolescence when individuals begin to consider who they are (or wish to be), with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their time and energies (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Stanford, 1962) as well as *(c) amongst certain populations,* especially those who are marginalised or inclined to feel that way in said context (Strayhorn, 2012a, p20).
In writing about core element 3, Strayhorn points to the substantial evidence supporting the claim that belonging is particularly important during late adolescence and early adulthood, just as the majority of our students hit first year university (2012a, p 21). He argues that it can be difficult for some students (the vast majority of whom are in late adolescence and early adulthood) to focus on the expected tasks of studying, learning and retaining information if one of their most fundamental needs, belonging, is yet to be met. This core element resonates with my own experiences of undergraduate study and my work in tertiary education for over two decades. The vast majority of my students are both anxious and excited about taking the next step to university; however, if this anxiety is not acknowledged and adequately managed, it can significantly interfere with their ability to study and make the most of the opportunities campus life has to offer. This point is also supported by the evidence we gathered during the student focus groups in 2011, where students indicated they often required support (much to their surprise) in making connections and activating a sense of belonging upon arrival at university (Carlin et al. 2012, p 60).

Overall, I found number 4 of Strayhorn’s core elements to be the most compelling. In discussing how a ‘sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering’, he argues there is considerable evidence to support the feeling of mattering as being vital to students and a substantive influence on student success and motivation (p21). In contrast to the work of Walton, Cohen, Cwir and Spencer (Walton, et al. 2011), Strayhorn evokes Rosenberg and McCullough’s (1981) five dimensions of mattering to suggest that to ‘satisfy the need for belongingness, the person must believe one cares’ (p 21). These are outlined by Strayhorn in the following manner:

(a) attention (i.e., noticed in positive ways, commands interest), (b) importance (i.e., care about, special, object of another’s concern), (c) dependence (i.e., feeling needed, reciprocity), (d) appreciated (i.e., feeling respected), and (e) ego extension (i.e., believing others share in our success) (Strayhorn, 2012a, p21).

Once again this is an element that resonates deeply with my own experience as both a student and a teacher. In my final year as an undergraduate I was offered much needed work within the Media Department at Deakin University selling various pieces of equipment and film and photographic stock. I was offered the job as a result of getting to know staff through my extracurricular activities co-running a collaborative student media group. Although the money was vital for my
survival, it was this direct recognition of my contribution that made a profound difference to my persistence and led to my first teaching position on graduation.

This experience has led me to make particularly concerted efforts to ensure my students feel they really matter and their success is important to me. This is especially so with my low socio-economic status and Indigenous students, many of whom I spend considerable time individually coaching beyond my normal scope of duties. The concept of making sure all students feel they matter underpins my philosophical approach to teaching and other forms of evidence that this approach is successful can be seen in the teaching awards I have earned, the many unsolicited student testimonials I receive and the strong long-term relations I have with many of my alumni from the range of institutions where I have worked.7

Although the work of The Belonging Project is very much focused on creating environments where a sense of genuine mattering is promoted, it is worth noting that Walton et al. work produced results suggesting ‘even a minimal emphasis on social connectedness enriches predominant theories of motivation’ (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p17). It is The Belonging Project’s contention that it doesn’t take much effort to make a big difference for the students and small, considered measures can have significant results (Clarke Wilson, 2016, p1). The Belonging Project was specifically designed to make it easy for staff to create welcoming, inclusive environments for students by embedding an ethos of belonging throughout the entire student experience.

The most complex of Strayhorn’s core propositional elements is number 5, ‘Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging’ (p22). As he points out, given the dynamic and synergistic nature of the process, it is difficult to fully explore the range of aspects that influence identity formation (2012a, p22). He argues that to fully understand how student experiences are influenced by a sense of belonging, ‘one must pay close attention to issues of identity, identity salience or “core self”, ascendance of certain motives, and even social contexts that exert influence on these considerations’ (p22).

As discussed earlier, social identities including race, gender, class and sexual orientation all intersect differently with how a person might experience a sense of belonging. Strayhorn points out that ‘although the need for belonging is universal

7 I have received a University Teaching Award for Humanities and the Arts (2007) RMIT University, an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning (2008) (shared with RMIT Media teaching team) and the University Teaching Award for Programs That Enhance Learning: The First Year Experience (2013) (shared with The Belonging Project team).
and applies to all people, it does not necessarily apply to all people equally' and educators need to keep this in mind when designing interventions for students (2012a, p22). This point goes some way to explaining why, when Strayhorn applies belonging in his research, the majority of the programs he analyses are focused on helping particular minority cohorts such as Latino, gay, first-year bridging, STEM (science technology engineering maths), students of colour and black male collegians (Strayhorn, 2012a).

Point number 5 has particular relevance for The Belonging Project when considering Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience (see Wilson, et al. 2013; Clarke & Wilson, 2016). Concern for students coming from diverse backgrounds directly informed a number of the initiatives designed to help all students navigate the transition to university including the Coordinated Orientation Week Activities, A Cohort Day Out, Academic Transition Initiatives and End of Year Festival of Exhibitions and Events (Carlin et al, 2012, p43). In addition to the series of transition to university modules targeting at risk students (mature age, Indigenous and pathway students) run from RMIT’s centralised student services, we made a very deliberate decision to not isolate these students in our belonging initiatives. As Strayhorn points out, it is normal for late adolescents to experience anxiety during major life transitions such as starting university (2012a, p20), and our initiatives were designed to help all our students, regardless of their background, to transition to the cultural norms of our School and distinct discipline expectations of each individual program.

It was also something we focused considerable attention on in Phase 4: The Global at Home: At Home in the Global, when we designed a range of interventions to acknowledge and celebrate the existing diversity within our classrooms (Clarke, Wilson & Araujo, 2015, p24). This final phase of the project was divided into initiatives that loosely fit the following taxonomy: feeling, doing and being global. All initiatives were designed to ensure that the diverse cultural identities of staff and students were recognised and acknowledged, as we argued that university graduates ‘need to be responsive to economic, social, cultural/global, technical and environmental change, capable of working flexibly and intelligently across a range of business contexts, and in possession of a broad range of skills learned in many contexts and through a range of experiences’ (Clarke et al. 2015, p16). Indeed, the very point of this tier was to design interventions that ensured everyone could be included and diversity was celebrated.
In exploring core element 4 a ‘sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes’, Strayhorn’s list of favourable outcomes that can be expected when belonging within higher education is adequately satisfied is considerable (2012a, p22); he identifies the following as being the most useful within higher education contexts; engagement, achievement, wellbeing, happiness, optimal functioning and persistence intentions (student retention) (p22).

Interestingly, within The Belonging Project we experienced some trouble providing robust statistical evidence for improvements in retention and engagement. There are a number of reasons for this, beginning with the initial motivation driving the project and the methodological approach selected. Many of the programs that seek to activate a sense of belonging for students have experienced particular student engagement problems that require action. However, although large, the School of Media and Communication has not historically experienced significant issues of student attrition or lack of persistence. One of the initial aims of The Belonging Project was to maintain these already strong results and share techniques among teaching staff. Another was to ‘future-proof’ programs through significant curriculum renewal, as major shifts in the diversity of students selected were enacted. We were also aiming to provide an antidote to the institutional change fatigue faced by staff by recentring attention on the student experience and the important role of higher education more generally (Carlin et al. 2012, p16). We argue that developing a holistic and binding narrative model of belonging of the entire student experience is valuable to staff and students alike (Clarke and Wilson, 2016, p12).

Quantitative sampling, such as course evaluation surveys and student experience surveys, are often used to measure retention and engagement factors, and our decision to use a qualitative research methodology made it difficult to show any significant statistical changes in these particular areas. However, all members of the academic lead team were directly involved with student welfare issues throughout the entirety of the project and were highly attuned to any student complaints or issues. Now that the pilot phase of the project is complete and we have been able to reflect on the lessons learnt, this is probably the aspect that we would like to change the most as we take the project forward. Indeed, we have already begun working with staff in the Business Intelligence Unit who have

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8 There is evidence that higher entry requirements for programs correlate with higher rates of retention and success (Thomas, 2012, p31). Many of the programs offered within the School are among the most popular in Victoria and subsequently have high school entrance scores.
considerably more experience in mining the data that can provide numbers and appropriate measures for assessing these factors.

The final of Strayhorn’s seven core elements, a ‘sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change’, can be directly linked to The Belonging Project’s aim of a holistic, whole-of-program approach (p23). As Strayhorn points out:

\[
\text{over time and through various [positive] experiences students’ sense of belonging, of personal acceptance, or having a rightful, valued place in a particular social context tends to stabilize and consistently influence one’s commitments and behaviors (Strayhorn, 2012a, p23)}
\]

The Belonging Project’s Narrative Model used evidence gathered from the student focus groups to create a whole-of-program approach (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p13). Although over the life cycle of a three-year undergraduate degree specific aspects of the student experience take on more or less emphasis (discipline, interdiscipline and global), there is consistency in the continuous basis on which an ethos of belonging needs to be activated for all students.

**Summary**

Strayhorn’s literature review and analysis of belonging in higher education contexts have proven useful in understanding how to situate The Belonging Project’s approach and my practice within this domain of higher education research. It is useful to note the book emerged from his practical research, conducted prior to his decision to write the book (Strayhorn, 2012a, p5). Similarly, it is through undertaking the projects that my understanding of the potential of belonging to operate as an overarching tool capable of providing narrative cohesion for the student experience has grown. It is has been helpful to discover that our initial tacit ideas concerning belonging have proven to be consistent with other practitioners’ theoretical investigation, design and delivery of student engagement and success programs across the world. As I have reflected on how The Belonging Project directly interacts and reflects an ethos of belonging, I have regularly returned to the seven core elements outlined by Strayhorn. In situating our work on belonging, I believe The Belonging Project can be seen as an extension of Strayhorn’s work; by creating a whole-of-program and inclusive narrative, we have extended the activation of a sense of belonging to all students, not just those from vulnerable and marginal cohorts. Using the data gathered from students and our tacit knowledge from many years of teaching, we linked the
activation of a sense of belonging directly to students’ disciplinary studies in order to continue to build capacity within various realms over time (Carlin et al. 2012 p29).

In summing up and as many of the authors cited here have noted, there is no one conclusive definition of belonging. It is an extremely flexible concept and one that can be applied and activated in many aspects of life and that is related to many facets of human identity. It is dynamic, sensory, multidimensional, and changes over time. However, what is clear is that it is a fundamental, universal human experience. When felt, it can be instrumental to the way we process information, seek motivation and experience connection and pleasure. When actively promoted in higher education settings, it has a vast array of proven benefits. These include retention, improved transition (especially for vulnerable cohorts) and deeper engagement. As Strayhorn argues, it benefits ‘multiple dimensions of cognition and behavior, including their perceptions, wellbeing, involvement, academic performance, and mental health’ (2012a, p64). A lack of a sense of belonging at university is one of the main factors cited by students for attrition and poor academic performance, and can be causally linked to low satisfaction rates among graduates (Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007).

In utilising many of the same original sources in defining belonging, The Belonging Project sits neatly alongside others working within the student experience space (Walton, Cohen, Cwir & Spencer, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012a; Thomas, 2012; Ribera, Miller & Dumford, 2015). While we have carved out a particular spot within the scholarship of first-year higher education in Australia, having twice been selected for publication in the International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education (Morieson, Carlin, Clarke, Lucas & Wilson, 2013; Araújo, Carlin, Clarke, Morieson & Wilson, 2014), we argue that belonging is a concept that should be applied to the entire student journey and can be activated towards a range of different outcomes. We have also presented at the 2015 Students Transition Achievement and Success peer reviewed conference (Araújo, Clarke, & Wilson, 2015); at the 2015 peer reviewed Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) conference (Araújo, Wilson, & Clarke, 2015); and the 2014 Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia Conference (PESA) (Araújo, Wilson, Clarke & Carney, 2014), situating ourselves firmly within the field.
Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the range of strategies we used to activate an ethos of belonging during The Belonging Project’s pilot phase (2011–2015). Although it was tempting to spend this chapter recounting, step by step, the procedures I undertook in the project, instead I take the opportunity to discuss the genesis of the project, what problems we sought to address and why I was compelled to take action. This chapter is therefore dominated by the stories that were not selected for inclusion in the public record through the annual reports and publications, but nonetheless illustrate important aspects of my shifting knowledge, leading to changes in my practice as a tertiary academic.

The Belonging Project has taught me a tremendous amount about how to conduct and operate within a large, complex, long-term collaborative project. The Belonging Project has also provided an opportunity to learn how to: navigate internal institutional politics; use an important range of communication techniques; utilise a variety of leadership techniques needed to manage change effectively; and to deepen my understanding of how change occurs within the broader context of higher education. The Belonging Project is also the site where I have learnt how to perform collaboratively in a large scale longitudinal research project and how to navigate the challenges this type of work presents to researchers. As a result, I have come to understand just how deeply my scholarship and identity as a tertiary academic are dependent on collaborative working methodologies and how this work is inextricably linked to the concept of belonging.
Origin Stories

The initial idea for The Belonging Project emerged from a formal leadership retreat for the newly formed School of Media and Communication (Carlin et al. 2012, p6). RMIT University had just released its latest five-year strategic plan and the newly appointed Dean (Professor Stephanie Hemelryk Donald) had asked attendees to break into small groups to discuss how we might ‘operationalise’, or make real on the ground, the priorities set out within the strategy (RMIT, 2010a). Underneath the three main goals of the strategy (global, urban and connected) were 14 priority areas, the most pertinent for the retreat being: ‘Ensure that all students have the opportunity for an international experience as part of their enrolment at RMIT’; ‘Develop curriculum which is internationally relevant and incorporates cross-cultural learning’; ‘Initiating development and improvements to internationalise academic programs’; and ‘Providing support to redress the socio-economic disadvantages faced by some students’ (RMIT, 2010b, pp9–11).

The other dominant theme of the retreat was cost saving and how the School could do more for less, and therefore any suggestions for innovation and change were expected to be cost-neutral at the very least. There had been a recent change in policy within the University that saw a greater percentage of the funds each school was traditionally allocated being redirected back into the central university budget. As a result the School needed to develop strategies to better leverage the central services already offered by the University if we wished to continue delivering high-quality teaching and learning outcomes.

There were a number of other intersecting factors that contributed to the initial spark that eventually triggered The Belonging Project idea. Firstly, the release of RMIT’s five-year strategy coincided with the release of the anticipated review into higher education, commonly known as the Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2008). Unlike many of my peers at the time, I had read the report and was keen to see how RMIT would respond to the Governments expectations of an increased commitment to student diversity in the sector. Secondly, I was at the time the selection officer for the Media program and responsible for overseeing the admission of all new students into the degree, and therefore was acutely aware

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9 In 2009 RMIT University merged two separate schools (School of Applied Communication and School of Creative Media) into one super-sized entity - The School of Media and Communication. With over 200 academic staff and 6000 students, The School of Media and Communication was, at that time, the biggest in the University and comparable in size to many faculties at other institutions. The merger (although generally running smoothly) evoked a significant amount of anxiety among staff as there had been very little concrete consultation with the ongoing academics and a feeling of being subject to a series of closed-door deals was prevalent.
of the transition issues faced by first-year students coming into higher education for the first time. I had previously played an active role in the running of first-year student orientation programs for the School of Applied Communication and was also a member of the university-wide Transition Committee. Thirdly, the majority of my teaching within the Media program took place at the most stressful transition points for students of first semester in first-year and final semester in third year. I had learnt through experience that students often needed help in managing their anxiety if they were to complete their studies and I had developed a range of curriculum interventions and assessment tasks for this purpose\(^\text{10}\) (Jollands & Pocknee, 2015, p18). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, for one of the group brainstorming exercises at the retreat I found myself working directly with colleague Dr David Carlin. By then David and I had been working together for a number of years and had previously worked on a project documenting the pedagogical and curriculum innovations we had implemented within the Bachelor of Communication (Media) program. Subsequently we had developed a limited shorthand when discussing curriculum-related issues.

As indicated in the previous chapter, I had also begun to seriously engage with the growing body of research on transition and retention within the first-year student experience (FYE) emerging from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). Through this reading I had become very interested in what we could do to develop a more holistic and consistent narrative about the Media program's objectives, for use by the staff and to help the students make sense of the logic of the program structure. The idea of a unified curriculum had been tested and was being strongly advocated by 2009 Senior ALTC Fellow Sally Kift. When implemented, it can help ensure all aspects of the student experience (within both the formal and informal curriculum) are taken into account when designing meaningful student experiences (Kift, 2009, p9).

As David and I chatted we discussed a number of the ‘blue sky’ ideas that been floated in the previous session. One of the ideas we focused on was a radical suggestion to send all the students off campus on some sort of global experience. Although this was speculative in nature, I found myself becoming agitated and upset as the discussion progressed. The conversation provoked an unexpected but very particular memory about the acute anxiety I had experienced as an undergraduate student in relation to my often-tenuous financial position. In trying

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\(^{10}\) In 2015 I was to asked document some of these curriculum interventions for an Office of Learning and Teaching resource titled Short Stories produced as part of the Developing Graduate Employability through the Partnerships with Industry and Professional Associations commissioned project. (Jollands and Pocknee, 2015, p18.)
to communicate why I was having such a visible emotional reaction during a relatively harmless discussion, I found myself directly referring to Bourdieu and Passeron’s idea of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, p56).11

As a child of working class parents and as a first-in-family university student, I had used up a lot of my stores of cultural capital through the very act of entering university study. Remaining enrolled in order to finish my degree took considerable effort and personal sacrifice and it was only made possible when I unexpectedly won a cash prize from a cola company and through extending my government loans. Had an overseas trip of the nature we were discussing been expected of me as an undergraduate, it would have been completely out of my reach, financially and emotionally. Even if aid had been offered, I don’t think I would have been able to access it, such was my belief that I didn’t deserve it. These are not uncommon feelings and beliefs among first-in-family students who often do not have familial norms of access or previous, learnt experience to rely on (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009).

Although momentarily distressing, this outburst did provide a breakthrough moment for David and me, enabling us to discuss how important it was to explicitly and incrementally build the cultural capital and confidence of all our students through both formal and informal curriculum interventions throughout an entire degree. This subsequently led to a discussion of the need for a broader narrative of diversity and inclusion for the School. When asked to share our conversation with the larger group, we found ourselves pitching a rough sketch of an inclusive narrative model that would eventually become the backbone of The Belonging Project and the beginning of The Belonging Project Narrative Model.

The Belonging Project Narrative Model

The idea of The Belonging Project Narrative Model presented at this first leadership retreat in 2010 has changed very little over time and is based on the following logic. As students enter their Media and Communication degree, most urgent amongst their first-level concerns is getting to know their immediate cohort peers and gaining a basic understanding of their discipline. As their confidence and capacity in their own discipline grow, they are then introduced to the interdisciplinary environment by working with staff and students from other programs in the School. Finally, as capacity in this sphere develops (and their

11 Sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron’s theories of cultural capital and habitus formed through the examination of the different educational outcomes of children in 1960s France refer to the non-economic social assets that individuals possess that can aid in social mobility (Bourdieu, 1977)
confidence in their disciplinary skills and knowledge continues to grow), they have better skills and knowledge to participate in the large array of global opportunities offered throughout the University (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p13).

The model is designed to be flexible yet still provide a unifying narrative for both staff and students. Rather than having a series of discrete innovative curriculum ideas, the model ensures any new curriculum ideas are discussed in relation to how students build knowledge and skills in the priority areas across their entire life cycle in relation to the three tiers, which are disciplinary (program), interdisciplinary (school) and intercultural (global) (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p13).

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Figure 1: The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p13)
The barriers to harnessing interdisciplinary practices between the programs within the new School were the focus of another significant discussion at the retreat. At the time of the merger there were eleven undergraduate programs and eight distinct program structures, making it almost impossible to conduct interdisciplinary coursework between programs. The School also offered (and still does) three different bachelor’s degree qualifications: Bachelor of Design, Bachelor of Communication and Bachelor of Arts. The need for significant work to be completed in structurally aligning of all the undergraduate and postgraduate programs within the newly formed school was identified early and was seen as vital for future-proofing the School. The Belonging Project became a key player in the implementation of this strategy, locally known as MC2015 (Media and Communication 2015). Discussion surrounding our role can be found in Report 2013 Phase 3: Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience (Wilson, Clarke, Carlin, Araujo, Lukas & Shand, 2014, pp14–15).

On our return to RMIT, the idea for a project centred on an inclusive and cohesive narrative quickly gathered momentum. The Dean liked the idea and, unbeknownst to us, spoke to the University’s Head of Student Services, who in turn sent us an invitation to submit a proposal to access funds from the federally funded HEPPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme) scheme. It was at this point that we invited Bronwyn Clarke to join our team. Bronwyn had been suggested to us in her role as Programs Director and head of selection for the School. I was excited to work with Bronwyn again as we had established a good rapport from our time working in selection. I knew from various conversations during that time that Bronwyn shared my passion for providing access to students from diverse backgrounds and most importantly for developing strategies to ensure that students were adequately supported once they enrolled.
The Belonging Project pilot consists of four distinct yet overlapping project phases researching the three-tiers outlined previously (see Table 1: The four phases of The Belonging Project page 5). The overall project’s aims were:

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Figure 2: The Belonging Project Aims (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p12)

Throughout the four years of the pilot project we secured $580,236 in funding, with the majority of the funds from the HEPPP scheme. However, in the final year our HEPPP allocation was significantly reduced and we were required to apply for an RMIT Learning and Teaching Innovation Fund (LTIF) grant and also to utilise money the team had received in the form of a teaching prize in 2013. We supplemented our budget through a number of small grants from the School, and funding for the second and third stage refurbishments of the informal student space (SISI) was provided by the University’s Property Services division.

As previously indicated, each year of the project we tackled a new set of issues and continued to build on the research conducted in the previous phase. In looking back at the early reports, it is interesting to note that many of the conditions that led to the project, and as outlined in our first report from 2011, have not substantially changed since we began the project. In overall terms, The Belonging Project has sought to address what a contemporary university experience might be for students in a world where access to cheap online content has shifted the focus from bricks-and-mortar universities. Universities are less and less the gatekeepers of disciplinary content, so they must provide value-added experiences that cannot be had anywhere else. It is our contention that, in order for these experiences to provide real value to students, these experiences need to be coordinated, relevant and meaningful, and the The Belonging Project’s Narrative Model is our contribution to this debate.
Collaborative Working Methods

The majority of the funds we secured over the four years went to paying the wages for two part-time positions (a research officer and project officer). Some funds were used to buy out small amounts of teaching for Bronwyn, David and myself. Given the longitudinal nature of the project, its objective of grassroots change, an understanding that professional staff are critical to the student experience, and the labyrinthine nature of RMIT’s systems, we decided to recruit for the roles of project officer and research officer from within the RMIT community. Having worked with Karli Lukas for a number of years in her capacity as a senior administrative staff member, I was familiar with her eye for detail, deep knowledge of RMIT processes, long-term relationships with people outside the School and proven commitment to the student experience, she was an obvious choice for the project officer role. Applying our value of capacity-building at the grassroots level, we looked to the Schools recent doctoral graduates to fill the research officer position (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p14). After some discreet enquiries, we invited Dr Lucy Morieson to the team as the part-time researcher. Lucy had recently completed her PhD in journalism and was tutoring within a number of the School’s politics and communication courses on a sessional basis. Her mix of well-developed writing skills and recent experience as a student within the School proved to be a perfect match to the skills and character traits within the team. Later, after Lucy resigned from the project to live abroad, we recruited external candidate Dr Natalie Araujo as the project’s new research officer. Natalie’s background in anthropology, ethnography and law brought a new (yet very complementary) set of skills that proved vital after David and Karli returned to their normal duties prior to the completion of the pilot phase.

As the project team had expanded rapidly, and recognising the diverse nature of our combined disciplinary training, we quickly realised we needed to establish some robust collaborative protocols. Throughout the project we employed a wide range of collaborative methods. Many of these methods have been adapted from the design discipline and others are common to any productive working group. Below is a list of the most useful collaborative methods we regularly employed:

1) Setting weekly project meetings (escalating in frequency during busy periods)
2) Ensuring thoroughly documented outcomes of all meetings and following up on all outstanding items before each meeting
3) Including everyone in most email correspondence between members and other relevant stakeholders
4) Checking in and de-briefing as deliberate and managed practices
5) Use of Edward De Bono’s Six Hat technique for critique (De Bono, 1986)
6) Ensuring all team members attended all planning sessions.
7) Use of a ‘forensic wall’ consisting of butcher’s paper, sticky notes, diagrams and audio recordings in planning sessions
8) Holding off-campus strategic working retreats, allowing us to focus deeply and without interruption on the project for up to three days
9) Having dedicated work spaces for the project and research officers located close to academic team leaders

The use of butcher’s paper, coloured pens and sticky notes (and from time to time the audio recording of our sessions) proved to be among the most useful of our collaborative working methods. The practice of creating a ‘forensic wall’ is common in interaction design research and proved immensely helpful to those of us from different disciplinary backgrounds, allowing us to visualise our ideas spatially and temporally (Yuille, 2012). The method was adopted as a result of the work David was simultaneously conducting with design researchers within the School. A useful extension of these techniques was the use of diagrams in the planning and discussing of our ideas. We made a very particular effort throughout the project to record and document these processes, largely as a means of evidencing our research and working methodology. This visual proof of our methods and our thinking helped to demystify the process and to assist others wishing to implement our methodological approach. It also meant we had a ready source of images for our annual reports.

I generally took the job of the butcher’s paper/whiteboard scribe and, while at times others certainly joined me in the scribbling and working-through process, in overall terms this tended to be my role. This method of being able to nut out ideas in broad brushstrokes is one that I have come to value highly through this process. Butchers paper and sticky notes provide flexibility to reorder ideas and concepts. We could very easily see how things flowed and, most importantly, what parts were missing or needed expanding. When using our butcher’s paper technique we would often quickly come up with a shorthand working title or name for an initiative/intervention that would inevitably stick. It was these moments of creativity that made working on this project enjoyable as well as rewarding.

I have known for a long time that talking out my ideas is a method I personally find particularly useful. The regular meetings where ideas were discussed, refined and discussed again suited my working methodology very well. However, it was
the protocols we adopted in the meetings that ensured they remained productive. Even with such a small team, it was important to have a process that allowed everyone to feel they had a voice and their ideas were heard and considered. We would always make sure to ‘check in’ with each person as the meeting came to a close, and to confirm the outcomes and actions we were individually committing to undertaking before the next meeting.

Another very useful collaborative method we adopted early was Edward De Bono’s Six Hat technique for critique (De Bono, 1986). After one or two small incidents of minor offence, we realised that we each exhibited certain biases towards particular approaches in providing feedback. Once we implemented De Bono’s system (modified to four hats for our purposes), our conversations and discussions proved to be much more productive. In fact, we came to value what had previously been perceived as negative comments as opportunities to clarify issues, which often led to a much better solution overall. Staff in the Media program have regularly used the De Bono system in the classroom when guiding students to provide constructive and meaningful feedback, but this is the first time I had used it consistently within a professional collaborative context. The act of saying ‘I’m about to put my black, green, red or yellow hat on’ immediately shifted the listening of the team and allowed the person providing the feedback to get to the point quickly, relieved of the pressure to placate others in case offence was taken.

Given the longitudinal nature of the project and the range of personalities that made up the team, there was relatively little conflict. Of course there were tensions from time to time, when a team member would feel frustrated about something or other, or there would be a minor personality clash. However, these incidents tended to last only for a few days at most, and our regular meetings and deep commitment to the underlying values in the project enabled us to iron these out in a genuinely open way. We tried to practise what we preached and to be open with each other, and to discuss the issues that were of concern. Over time, although the makeup of the team has shifted, all previous team members still play an active role in continuing to promote the projects objectives and values in their new positions.

As a project, we found that one of the most efficient ways to move the project forward in a proactive, strategic manner was to spend regular sessions off campus, where possible at an overnight working retreat. This method of ‘strategic retreat’ allowed us to focus our attention on the project with minimum distractions and to thoroughly discuss all aspects, test assumptions and biases among ourselves, and examine aspects of the project from a number of perspectives.
This approach is a privileged one and not all projects are able to afford the time to travel or pay for accommodation and meals, etc. but we found it to be vital to the trajectory and cohesion of the project.

During the final stages of the pilot and as staff roles changed, we did modify this strategy away from overnight stays, but managed to replicate the core elements of the approach by block-booking whole days (often consecutively) in a location away from our offices to focus entirely on the project. This too has proven successful, but we have missed the informal interactions and connections that took place around the dinner table, as it is these moments of shared experience that are at the heart of many of The Belonging Project’s interventions and philosophy. It was often in these informal interactions that a casually mentioned idea could be ‘workshopped’, often leading to a breakthrough moment for the project.

Through my work on The Belonging Project, I have been introduced to, and have developed skills in, a number of new collaborative working methods. Many of these methods have been adapted from design research and were introduced to the project by Bronwyn, whose professional disciplinary background is in communication design. Working collaboratively in these ways not only helped the project outcomes, but also allowed me to experience a sense of personal belonging among the team members. The strategy to invest in regular off-campus working retreats was especially helpful in building the trust and sense of mattering inherent in a strong sense of belonging. As a result of the success of these methods within the project, I have subsequently used many of these techniques within my classroom teaching, both in terms of project management techniques but also as a tool to develop and activate a sense of belonging among students.

**Activating a Sense of Belonging for Staff**

As a result of a number of the implicit aims of the project, to better connect with the central services offered by the University and to help facilitate the connecting of the dots across the entire student experience for staff and students, the team was required to learn a great deal about the inner workings of all aspects of a large university. For me this has been one of most satisfying benefits in undertaking the project and has been a significant learning curve. My previous experience working in the film industry was that of an assistant director. This is a largely logistical role that requires a solid working knowledge of all aspects of the production chain in order to create ambitious yet achievable filming schedules. It also entails constant negotiation and communication between the director and key creatives working on location and the production manager and producers in the office, whose job it
is to make sure the budgets align and overall schedules are maintained. I mention this as I believe this professional and disciplinary aptitude and experience (to fully understand a system process from its very beginning through to the very end) have contributed significantly to the project.

The list of University departments we had direct dealings with throughout the project is considerable. As the longest-serving RMIT staff members in the team, Bronwyn, Karli and I already had a considerable network of contacts across the University, but these grew considerably throughout the project. Given that the ethos of the project was to design a system to explicitly build a sense of belonging to RMIT through building connections with their peers in their program and other students in the school, the need for this outreach was obvious, yet, as we discovered, rarely conducted. A habit of duplication had emerged throughout the institution as the legacy of the merging of a number of higher education providers under the RMIT umbrella in the 1990s. Coupled with the economic disaster of the early 2000s, RMIT had not invested in developing many institution-wide approaches. There was a widespread culture of ‘do-it-yourself’, with many schools and colleges choosing to replicate and customise services you would expect to be delivered centrally, leading to inconsistencies across the University. The Belonging Project realised that there was an opportunity to try to break this cycle and the pilot phase (2011–2014) was designed to test the model for possible application more broadly. We have been heavily influenced by the research from the FYE and its advice to create a whole of institution approach while maintaining the diversity and ensuring the particular needs of our specific student cohort were met (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010).

Our contacts in the University Admissions and Equity Group (a division of the Academic Registrars Group) were crucial in ensuring we were able to service the students for whom the HEPPP funding was intended. The lack of any useful

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13 RMIT experienced financial difficulties in 2004 after investing heavily in a failed computer system. It led to a prolonged period of fiscal restraint and wage freezes for all staff. (Epstein, R., 2003)

14 This task is more difficult than you might think. Firstly, the proportion of Victorian students classified as low SES is low (13.8%) in comparison to other states (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010, p1). A student’s SES status is calculated based on their postcode and the mean average income based on data sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (James, Bexley, Anderson, Devlin, Garnett, Marginson & Maxwell, 2008). Secondly, in overall terms RMIT’s data-gathering systems have meant it has been difficult to access the raw data on students’ SES status at the school and program level. Thirdly, there is obvious caution surrounding the privacy of students’ backgrounds. My years attending selection training, where there was mandatory training on how to select disadvantaged students, suggest this caution is warranted, when against all evidence to the contrary many selection officers insisted that students from low SES backgrounds regularly underperform in class.
demographic data about our students eventually led to one of the key initiatives delivered in the final phase of the project, *Phase 4: The Global At Home: At Home In the Global* (Clarke et al. 2015, p25). Working with RMIT’s Business Intelligence Unit, our Data-Pack Initiative was designed to put into practice the recommendation from FYE researchers of the importance of ‘knowing your students’ (Krause, 2005a, p12). The initiative was originally mooted for delivery in the second year of the project, *Phase 2: Focus on the First Year*. However, as is often the case, it took over three years for our request for de-identified demographic data to move through various internal committees and working groups. The newly formed Business Intelligence Unit also needed to synchronise multiple data systems and software packages in order to extract the exact data as requested. Once extracted, the data needed washing to make it de-identifiable and was then outputted into graphic representative form to be of use to programs in planning their curriculum activities for the upcoming academic year. As the initiative was rolled out, we designed a series of facilitated workshops to ensure the information was understood within the broader university and higher education context, and delivered in order to enable responsive and timely curriculum interventions and not used to discriminate. For more detail please see Clarke, Wilson & Araújo (2015). *Report 2014. Phase 4: The Global at Home: At Home in the Global* p25.

Another of the key central services we worked with throughout the life of the project has been the Student Learning Centre (SLC). While most academic teaching staff realise there is a central service to which they can direct their struggling students, they do not realise that the service also works one-on-one with staff to address academic literacies in individual courses and programs. As part of our work in *Phase 2 Focus on The First Year*, we established a series of morning-tea get-togethers with staff from the School and the SLC. This proved useful for many academic staff and has resulted in the SLC occasionally setting up a desk within the informal space student, contributing to the professional development within the School and direct relationships with a number of individual teaching staff (Clarke & Wilson, 2015, p26).

We also worked extensively with the division of Property Services at RMIT on the Student Informal Spaces Initiative (SISI). In this initiative, I took the academic lead and worked closely with staff to ensure the two major refurbishments of the Atelier Space in Building 9 produced the intended benefits to the students. I learnt a great deal about the diversity of professional cultures and hierarchies within
the differing departments at RMIT through working on this initiative. Modes of practice within academic units tend to be less formal than in my dealings with Property Services, where I was often reminded there was a ‘proper way’ to do things and everything had to happen in a very slow and very particular order (until we reached the annual end-of-year spending spree: then everything had to be signed off yesterday). That said, I did find a number of allies within Property Services who were sympathetic to our needs and helped us considerably in negotiating these complex processes. As a division they were not used to working directly with academics, so my outsider status did provide some leeway from time to time. As with all aspects of The Belonging Project, this was a collaborative initiative with a great deal of the day-to-day leg work completed by project officers Karli Lukas and subsequently Laetitia Shand, who assisted us in the last months of the pilot.

Other groups we worked with throughout the project include: RMIT Marketing, we were invited to present work-in-progress findings at its annual forum; and Library Services where we worked directly with liaison librarians to develop strategies to best meet the specific needs of communication staff and students. We also worked with many colleagues across the various colleges and schools throughout the university, in particular staff in the college of Science Engineering and Health (SEH) and the School of Property, Construction and Project Management, who invited us specifically to contribute to a number of their in-house learning and teaching forums.

Throughout the project we worked hard to develop a culture of interconnectedness between staff in the School and others throughout the University. From the start we understood that it was vital to foster a sense of belonging for staff before we could expect to influence the student experience (Carlin et al. 2012, pp26–29). For many of our students the classroom is the only time they come into direct contact with university culture, so it is important to ensure staff feel connected so they bring an ethos of belonging to the classroom, whether explicitly or implicitly.

To build deeper connections within the School, we initiated a series of Champions Lunches aimed at inspiring grassroots cultural change (Carlin et al. 2012, p29). To activate this initiative, we identified a specific champion in each of the twelve undergraduate programs and held a series of inexpensive lunches. The lunches were effective on a number of levels, enabling informal discussion about the project and its aims, and building networks and dialogue among staff. This small and relatively cheap initiative proved to be surprisingly effective,
quickly promoting a broader sense of belonging among the staff in the still new School. That said, this is a strategy that requires consistency and, as the project progressed, we found ourselves stretched for time and resources and experienced difficulty in maintaining these interactions to the degree we would have liked. This has impacted on the project in terms of maintaining the front of mind visibility of the project within the School and on reflection, as we move into a new phase for the project, we will definitely work to ensure this strategy is embedded and resourced better.

Another strategy in fostering connections within the School was to implement what we loosely described as ‘match-making’. Throughout the project we facilitated a range of formal and informal gatherings and events. We made sure all staff (including professional and sessional teaching staff) working in the School were invited to these events. The events were often catered and we ensured there was always enough informal time devoted to discussion and the comparing of notes. Finding time to just talk and compare experiences is increasingly difficult in contemporary universities, and yet it is vital for the wellbeing of staff and the maintenance of consistency across divisions. The formal elements of our presentations were deliberately kept short (by sending copies of the material both before and after the event) in order to allow time for this informal exchange of ideas and information. After inviting all staff via email and calendar invitations, we would often send personalised reminders to people we felt would benefit most from that particular session. I am aware that none of these strategies are particularly innovative in and of themselves; however, I believe it is the consistency of our approach, our vigilance in following up on leads and requests, and the space we deliberately reserved for informal conversation that set these events apart from other professional development events arranged for staff. Many staff throughout the pilot stages commented that they appreciated the care we had taken to acknowledge their time by providing even tokenistic catering, they felt they mattered to us.

Perhaps the most successful strategy to build connections across the University was the establishment of our reference group, which met 3-4 times per year. While the membership of the group shifted throughout the different stages of the project as individuals changed positions within RMIT, we deliberately invited people who could provide alternative points of view and who held positions in the University privy to information that was of importance to the project. The reference group brought a number of significant benefits to the project by supplying guidance on who, inside the university hierarchy, was best placed (in terms of both
temperament and authority to shape outcomes) to help resolve any roadblocks we faced. They were also very helpful in promoting the project and disseminating the project’s findings throughout the far reaches of the institution. The group also provided useful advice on which evaluation strategies would be appropriate to particular initiatives, and helped maintain our confidence when we experienced bouts of disillusionment, especially in relation to how long it takes to influence change in large organisations.

Activating a Sense of Belonging For Students

Each of the annual reports included in the package of project artefacts outlines in considerable detail the interventions designed to activate a sense of belonging for students that were trialled during each phase of the project. In Chapter 2, I also situated many of these initiatives alongside the precise sense of belonging that we were attempting to activate, as outlined within the literature. However, I believe it will be useful to provide a brief overview here.

As indicated above, Phase 1: Planting The Seeds 2011, was less about directly activating a sense of belonging for students; rather it was devoted to developing our hypothesis and model and speaking to our students through a series of quantitative focus groups. The findings from these focus groups proved to be profoundly influential throughout the project and taught us all a great deal about how to conduct robust and useful quantitative research. There were a number of significant themes that emerged from and this we grouped these into the following eleven overlapping categories (Carlin, et al. 2012, pp31–33):

1. Attitudes towards university and RMIT
2. Orientation needs and expectations
3. Social expectations and issues
4. Academic expectations and issues
5. Industry and professional identity
6. Cross-Year connections
7. Trans-disciplinary connections
8. Student spaces and resources
9. Student communication
10. Internationalisation and global links
11. Alumni perceptions
The data we gathered through the focus groups provides compelling evidence that our hypothesis that all students would benefit from the deliberate activation of a sense of belonging, particularly when embedded in disciplinary curriculum - was true (Carlin et al. 2012, p58–67). Although the project team members appreciated the role of social connections within university life from our own experience as students, it was the poignant quotes from students, including the following, that really helped us to understand that the project needed to be holistic and to include initiatives and interventions that activated a sense of belonging across the formal and informal curriculum spaces:

I just wanted to come here and get it done, to be honest. I just wanted to get the degree done. I didn’t realise how much I actually cared about having friends until I came here and didn’t have any.

It’s been a massive difference actually, sort of having heaps of friends at uni now: makes it more motivating to go to class if you know you’re going to have fun and that sort of thing. You catch up before and afterwards. Like, we often just sit on the grass now and hang out, that sort of thing.

I’ve learnt probably as much from the other people I’m studying with as I have in the actual course itself (Carlin et al. 2012, p60).

From this research and data we gathered from a series of staff workshops, we developed a set of five initiatives to trial in Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience 2012. These were:

Initiative 1: Coordinated Orientation Week Activities
Initiative 2: A Cohort Day Out
Initiative 3: Student Informal Spaces Initiative (SISI)
Initiative 4: Academic Transition Initiative
Initiative 5: End of Year Festival and Exhibition (EOYF)

(Wilson et al. 2014, pp10–13)

While all team members were involved in some capacity in all initiatives, there were three that I took specific interest in. These were the Coordinated Orientation Week Activities, SISI and EOYF. As a result of my ongoing teaching in the first and final semesters, I already had considerable investment in both the Coordinated Orientation Week Activities and EOYF ideas. Conducting these initiatives under the auspice of The Belonging Project presented an opportunity to provide an overarching framework (and some much needed resources) to these activities and
helped build belonging for staff, as their existing work in these areas was finally being formally recognised.

However, not all aspects of the initiatives proved to be successful. Among the range of activities we designed to provide a coordinated experience for all incoming students were; Program Orientation Sessions; School Welcome Event; Orientation Passport and Competition; and SIS (Wilson et al. 2013, p23–29). The Orientation Passport and Competition failed to attract the incoming students’ attention in any meaningful way with only 4.3% of students redeeming the passport in order to win the substantial prize of a new iPad (Wilson et al. 2013, p28). We discuss in some detail the reasons for its failure in the 2012 annual report (Wilson et al.2013, p28).

The idea of a coordinated EOYF and events has also proven impossible to sustain outside the initial trials. Although initially excited by the prospect of a school festival, we found it virtually impossible to get the staff involved to supply up-to-date and consistent information about their program events. We persevered with the initiative into 2013 and were even able to secure some additional financial support from our then new Dean, Professor Martyn Hook, but without an individual deputised with some limited authority this is an initiative that proved to be beyond the capacity of the project after that point.

We learnt a great deal through the trialling of each of these initiatives and produced a considerable list of recommendations to ensure their sustainability (Wilson et al. 2013, pp11–13). However, to date there has been little uptake of the majority of these recommendations. This failure to implement evidence based good practice has brought home to us the need for both a grassroots and top down approach to change management. All the goodwill and hard work in the world cannot produce sustainable change unless there is substantial support from above. As noted in Chapter 1, these are common experiences for practice-based researchers in educational contexts and will inform how we go about redesigning the project going forward (Thomas, 2012, p19; Gibbs et al. 2016, p.3).

Like Phase 1, Phase 3: The Interdisciplinary Experience 2013, had few direct interventions for students. The project spent the majority of 2013 continuing to implement and monitor the initiatives implemented in 2012, and researching current practice and attitudes to interdisciplinary teaching practice. We discovered early that there was no consistent understanding of what interdisciplinary practice is or how best to go about it. The School was yet to undertake significant curriculum renewal to allow for cross-program collaboration,
and interdisciplinary teaching was largely ad hoc and driven by energetic individuals. Our main contribution to the interdisciplinary experience for the students was to continue to deliver small, targeted interventions in the student informal space (Wilson et al. 2014, p34).

Phase 4: The Global at Home: At Home in the Global saw a return to direct interventions activating student belonging within the context of global employability. The initiatives were formulated around three concepts: ‘feeling global’, ‘doing global’ and ‘being global’ (Clarke & Wilson, 2015, p21). By this stage the project team had whittled down to three and, given the ongoing facilitation and monitoring of Phase 2 and 3 initiatives, we made a decision to focus as many of the interventions as possible within our existing teaching commitments. Bronwyn was teaching two first-year communication design program courses and I had already begun work on planning a study tour where we took ten Melbourne-based students to study for two weeks at the RMIT Ho Chi Minh campus in Vietnam.

Both interventions were successful and enabled us to apply first hand many of the lessons on how to activate a sense of belonging within our own classrooms settings. The majority of the interventions in Phase 2 and 3 were centred on facilitating an ethos of belonging amongst staff and providing leadership for school-wide initiatives. The case studies we undertook in Phase 4 were opportunities for us to test out ideas in a very direct manner with our students.

The At Home Study Tour case study was designed to subvert the normal fly-in-fly-out paradigm of most study tours and instead we time-shifted the semester start dates with the Melbourne students travelling to Vietnam starting their semester early to coincide with the Vietnamese start dates. Of the 12 week semester, two were spent in Vietnam and the rest of the semester’s teaching took place in home cities through teleconferencing, online learning management systems and Facebook (Clarke & Wilson, 2015, pp29–30).

I personally learnt a great deal while planning and teaching this course. Planning was extensive, with many, many hours of Skype conferencing with my Vietnam-based colleagues. Yet once again it has been disappointing that many of the things we learnt and successfully implemented and recommended have yet to be taken up in a more systematic manner within the school. For example, we worked closely with a professional staff member employed to support study tours, to set up transparent selection criteria for student participation taking into account a range of equity issues. Yet I was recently asked to rank a number of students enrolled in
my program who had applied for a pending tour and when I asked what selection criteria they had established and what questions they had asked the students to respond to in order to determine eligibility, I was met with a blank stare.

**Communicating Our Findings**

The project’s annual reports have proven to be very useful tools in generating interest and communicating our findings to a broader audience. Over time there have been subtle changes in the tone and content of each report, reflecting the nature of the activities being reported, the building of a robust data set and the growing confidence of the team in the work we were undertaking. Throughout the project, we used a variety of systems to determine whose name would appear first in the long list of authors. With the first report we trialled alphabetical order, in the second we reversed this system. In our academic publications, as per traditional academic protocols, the main author (generally our research officer) came first, with alphabetical order following. Towards the end of the project, when Bronwyn and I remained the only academic leaders, we rotated the order of our names depending on the context of the publication. The decision to deliberately rotate the named authors of the reports and papers occurred after a few early incidents when David Carlin was assumed to be the only project leader and was formally identified within some forums as the ‘chief investigator’. These incidents provided the impetus to have an open conversation about credit and how we would represent ourselves publicly going forth. After this time we took special care in any public forum to communicate the collaborative nature of the project’s formation and execution.

Another tactic we used to communicate our work was to respond to any call, however small, to chat, discuss and present the project in virtually any situation. One of the most useful invitations we received was to present annually to the staff involved in marketing across the University. When first approached, we were uncertain how this would benefit the project, but over time it has paid dividends, as marketing staff often shift around the University, resulting in useful alliances in unexpected places. The tactic has also helped us to better understand how the various divisions within the University interact. Another regular presentation we undertook was RMIT’s annual Learning and Teaching Expo, once again allowing us to reach a wide range of people within the University. For a full list of our dissemination efforts, please see pages 5–10 in the overview document (Clarke & Wilson, 2016).
One of the biggest challenges in a longitudinal project such as this has been to maintain audience interest beyond the first year of exciting results. We responded to this by sending the reports to as many senior university officials, across a range of areas, as we could. This helped to keep the project alive in people’s minds and we are still discovering people who have heard of it in all sorts of places.

Summary

What is unique about The Belonging Project Narrative Model is its focus on incremental and deliberate growth of cohort capacity to build and maintain diverse relationships and interconnections. Four years can be a very long time in contemporary higher education, with many of the policy imperatives initially informing the project now obfuscated or watered down by changing governments and senior university executives. However, because the underlying values of the project remain independent of government policy, we have been able to utilise whatever particular concern is occupying senior administrators at any given time as a way to introduce the project to a broader audience.

For example, in the first two years of the project, first-year student attrition was presented as an issue for RMIT. Because the first tier of the project had been very influenced by the work of FYE researchers, we were able to respond quickly to calls for ideas. Inclusive teaching was an issue that emerged as a priority area within the second year. Our holistic approach to the student experience meant the School was able to report that it was actively responding to this agenda without having to ‘fudge’ the reporting or put on last-minute professional development workshops in order to be seen to be doing something. As we entered the third and fourth years of the pilot there was a national shift, led by the commissioning of a number of strategic projects funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching, towards an employability agenda. Once again, given the focus of incrementally building the cultural skills and capacities of students, we were in a very good position to contribute to the conversation and to report that we were active in addressing this agenda.

This trend towards a very explicit employability agenda has always presented a minor dilemma for me in terms of my identity as a tertiary academic. While on the one hand, as a student of the user pays Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) era myself, I understand the need for students to feel they are receiving value for money through the promise of strong professional employment outcomes, on the other hand, my belief in the more general transformational power of higher education forces me to ask whether high graduate employment in a softening
economy is the best measure of this? I also acknowledge that this position is at odds with both my own practical disciplinary training and the status of RMIT as a university dedicated to applied learning. However, these are concerns shared by many and I was relieved to observe that there has been a shift in this rhetoric at the recent 2016 HERDSA conference, where there appeared to be more emphasis on preparing students for the future beyond generic employability skills (HERDSA, 2016).

The Belonging Project was very much conceived as an attempt to proactively pre-empt reactionary policymaking on the run, which runs rife within the sector. Experience tells us that each year there will be a new crisis that needs to be responded to, as a result of either changing government policy or shifts in individual university management positions. The Belonging Project was designed to be preventive and create a holistic narrative of inclusion that would circumvent student engagement and retention issues before they arose. We argue that, by explicitly placing the conversation about educational values back at the centre of the student (and staff) experience, schools and programs are in a much better position to address the relentless call to respond to each new issue and, in doing so, save considerable amounts of time and wasted energy. I also argue, as I have in Chapter 1, that the values underpinning The Belonging Project go some way to counteracting these neoliberal management systems.

As we discovered early in the project, activating a sense of belonging is hard work and most effective when it is embedded in holistic curriculum design. But it is worth it for both staff and students (Wilson et al. 2013, p14). Students both need and want help transitioning to and through university, and when staff feel valued and appreciated this is often reflected in their classroom experiences. In conducting the four-year pilot we learnt a great deal and this can be summarised in these seven points:

1. **Start small and sustainable!** Develop low-cost, flexible initiatives aligned to program, school and university strategic goals which can start small and build over time.

2. **Work with what you have got!** Use action-based research models supported by short-term, initiative-based funding opportunities to maximise meaningful research outputs.

3. **Go grassroots!** Harness support and engagement from key staff (academic, professional and service) and identify champions who will advocate and support your work.
4. **Connect with your sector!** Get outside your institutional walls and engage with the sector and industry.

5. **Get your research out there!** Disseminate and talk about your findings through a range of avenues, both within your institution and externally.

6. **Embrace diversity!** Acknowledge the diversity (local and international) throughout your institution.

7. **Celebrate learning and teaching!** A strong L&T [Learning and Teaching] culture is required and can be promoted by the project.  
   (Clarke & Wilson, 2016, p36)
CHAPTER 4

Deliberate and Reflect

Introduction

In the story of my academic practice so far, I have outlined how my underlying personal and educational values led me to The Belonging Project, described how I came to discover and realise the potential of belonging as a theoretical concept in its own right, and situated the project within both the literature of practitioner-led action research and the domain of belonging in higher education. This chapter is therefore primarily focused on the changes in my practice as a tertiary academic that have emerged as a direct result of working and researching on, and through, The Belonging Project.

As discussed in Chapter 1, I was attracted to the practitioner-led action research methodological approach for a number of reasons, in particular the agency it affords me to examine my everyday work practices. Practitioner-led action research is, at its heart, a methodology about change and the desire to improve the everyday lived experience for people. As McNiff argues ‘action research is about personal and social change in the interests of social equality, recognition of diversity and appreciation of the problematics of social living’ (2013, p14).

The Belonging Project and this dissertation have forced me to examine my practice and enabled me to join the dots on what, from the outside, may appear to be an ad hoc career trajectory. In discovering the meta-narrative potential of the concept of belonging, I can now see how much of my working life has been devoted to activating the concept in a range of ways in my various roles both within and outside the University.

A number of years ago I conducted a back-of-the-envelope calculation in an attempt to figure out how many individual students I had taught throughout my career. At the time I came up with over 1000 and estimate that since that time the number has more than doubled. Each year on average, over the last 24 years I have been working as an academic, I have interacted directly with approximately 100 individual students within the classroom setting. While I am not claiming that
each student’s life was profoundly transformed by their interaction with me, this has given me pause to consider the real and ongoing impact of my work and has helped me grapple with the question of why my practice as an academic focused on the transformational potential of higher education matters.

**My Approach to Belonging**

My specific understanding of how a sense of belonging operates within the higher education sector has emerged from both my work on The Belonging Project and the active process of research and reflection that constitutes this dissertation. I believe that a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need that presents itself as a unique intrapersonal feeling which, when satisfied, has many positive effects making it particularly suited for use in educational contexts. A growing body of evidence shows that, when students experience a sense of belonging, they are more likely to get involved and engage with others across a range of activities. There are many ways in which a sense of belonging can be activated, depending on the desired outcomes for the students and the institution, and The Belonging Project’s Narrative Model of Student Engagement is one such contribution. I agree with Strayhorn’s argument that the concept of belonging is often confused with student engagement and involvement and student retention (Strayhorn, 2012a, p13). Instead, I have come to see student engagement and strong student retention as among the positive outcomes demonstrating that a sense of belonging exists for students.

I am drawn to the concept primarily because it so closely resembles my own transformative experience of undergraduate education. As a student at Deakin University, Rusden, in the early 1990s, the sense of belonging I felt among my peers, academics and professional staff was profound. The sense that I mattered (that we all mattered) was constantly and consistently communicated by the lecturers, tutors and the technical support staff, through their encouragement in and out of the classroom. It is clear on reflection that Rusden as an institutional experience was imbued with a very strong sense of belonging between its staff and students. As Judith Buckrich points out in her book *The Making of Us: Rusden Drama, Media and Dance 1966–2002*, there was a particularly rich and unique culture of inclusiveness that characterised the staff and student experience at Rusden (Buckrich, 2015, p4). Perhaps as a result of its size and geographical location in outer suburbia, Rusden was a place where staff and students regularly interacted both formally and informally and shared a vision of community, innovation, creativity and experimentation (pvii). Long after the campus closed,
this legacy is still actively manifested through the regular sharing of stories, resources and news from staff and graduates on the Facebook page set up by Buckrich when she began researching her book. It was the first time that I had genuinely experienced a strong sense of connection with peers my age. Although at the time I was considered somewhat conservative by my contemporaries, I was always included and my opinions were sought. I felt like I had an important role to play and I mattered. These positive experiences have come to play a fundamental part in the formation of my career as a media academic and continue to deeply influence my relationship to higher education in general.

I believe the ubiquitous use of the term ‘belonging’ within popular culture puts it at risk of being relegated to the ‘feel good’ part of teaching and learning, considered the icing on the substantive cake of disciplinary content. However, this misconception of the term means much of the concept’s cognitive power is marginalised. The evidence is mounting that when a sense of belonging is satisfied within higher educational contexts, it becomes easier to provide more rigorous disciplinary training in classroom settings leading to greater student success overall (Strayhorn, 2012a, p82). In other words, when a student experiences a sense of belonging and feels that they deserve their place at university, then there is greater inherent motivation to engage in the content of the class and the work produced is often of a higher, more rigorous standard. As the evidence from social psychology suggests, The Belonging Project’s Narrative Model of Student Engagement is predicated on the fact that a sense of belonging needs to be explicitly and consistently activated throughout a student’s life cycle and is most relevant to students when embedded within the formal and informal curricula of their discipline (Clarke and Wilson, 2016, p13).

Throughout the project, and especially in writing this dissertation, I have often thought about how the sense of belonging we activate within the project could continue to transform people’s lives beyond the undergraduate experience. In thinking about this in temporal terms and through reflecting on my own undergraduate experience, I began thinking in terms of ‘zones of belonging’. The diagram in Figure 3 below is reminiscent of one of the very first attempts at visually representing the three tiers of belonging from The Belonging Project (affectionately known as the telephone receiver) and I find it interesting, that as I complete my work on this phase of belonging, I have returned to reworking to one of our earliest visualisations (Carlin et al. 2012, p 25).
As the diagram depicts, the concept of higher education constitutes the broadest concentric field, then the discipline/profession (e.g. journalism), next we move to the particular higher education institution (e.g. RMIT) and finally the program/degree (e.g Bachelor of Communication). Different divisions within a university will seek to promote a sense of belonging within each zone at any given time. For example, Recruitment, Alumni and other centralised student service divisions (including Clubs and Societies, Housing and Student Learning Centres) might be charged with establishing and maintaining belonging within the broader zone of the institution. This differs from academics, who tend to be more focused on improving connections to individual programs and to the discipline/profession more generally. However, if everything is going right and there is a whole-of-institutional response, everyone is working to promote a sense of belonging in all zones and especially to the broader conceptual idea of higher education as an agent for societal and community transformation.
As Jon Dalton points out:

By promoting the quality of relationships and strengthening community through dialogue and commitment … universities prepare students for a world in which they must be open to new forms of community and in which the ability to construct community will be one of their greatest challenges and responsibilities (Dalton, 2006, p185).

**Reflective Practice**

Active reflection is the key method of the practitioner-researcher in asserting their claims to new knowledge. Coming to a working understanding of what is meant by reflective practice and how it operates within the methodology has constituted a significant part of my intellectual journey within this dissertation. What I have to come to realise is that the type of reflective practice regularly undertaken by practitioner-researchers is already a key part of my academic practice. After many years of practice, rarely do I now feel the need to write down my thoughts and reflections after each and every class; however, I do deliberately and actively engage in a range of other reflective practices including informal note taking, constant conversations with colleagues and the writing of papers for publication. As Kreber points out

it is the depth of the reflective processes underlying these inquiries that matters most to our professional learning and development, not the level of how formally we engage in these reflective processes (Kreber, 2012, p111).

My reflective practice in relation to The Belonging Project is most readily represented in the outcomes such as the annual reports, our long list of recommendations and the peer-reviewed publications and conference papers. Throughout this dissertation I have engaged with Mezirow’s three-staged taxonomy of reflection; content, process and premise reflection, to ask myself a series of questions (Kreber, 2013, p115). In relation to content reflection, I have described and defined the problems and issues we were concerned with. For process reflection, I have examined how we went on to solve and address the problems through the work of The Belonging Project and, within the process of premise reflection, I have examined the underlying core presuppositions and values that led me to the concept of belonging as a theoretical concept (p113).
Changes in My Practice

As discussed in Chapter 1 and in line with practitioner-led action research methodology, the claims to knowledge in relation to my practice can be divided into three broad categories: improvements in my knowledge; improvements in my skills; and improvements in my research capacity (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009, p44–45). Given that the practice of a contemporary tertiary academic is a complex mixture of teaching duties, research practice, administration, leadership and community service, I have divided my reflections on the changes to my practice into the following categories: teaching and curriculum design; project work, collaboration and institutional strategy; and research practices.

TEACHING AND CURRICULUM DESIGN

As I reflect on the changes to my teaching practice, the most interesting thing to me is how subtle the changes have been, taking place over a long period of time. Rather than dramatically changing any particular aspect of my teaching, conducting this research has provided me with considerably more confidence in my existing techniques. Even though I possess a teaching qualification, until undertaking The Belonging Project my approach to teaching could generally be described as largely intuitive and I taught in ways that I would like to have been taught myself. Through my engagement with practitioner-led research, my understanding of this process has expanded and I am able to see how this conceptualisation of my teaching practice as ‘intuitive’ is in fact the result of many years of practice and reflection. My research and reading in higher education policy and regulation have helped me to understand that my approach, and the values that underpin my teaching, can be traced directly to my education in emancipatory politics and ideology, first encountered in interactions with my family and formalised through my humanities education.

Much of this confidence can be attributed to the collaborative processes undertaken within The Belonging Project. As discussed in Chapter 3, I was able to collaborate both with my fellow academic project leaders and also with other teaching staff in the School of Media and Communication as we worked through the project. The open door policy we promoted throughout the project sees many of my colleagues regularly dropping in for a chat to ask my advice across a range of curriculum-related issues.

My confidence in my teaching and curriculum skills has also grown through presenting The Belonging Project’s work at large conferences, the publication of
our work in peer reviewed journals, and the writing and distribution of our annual reports. The opportunity to speak to people from many different disciplines, and from a range of universities, has helped me to understand just how useful many of our ideas and curriculum interventions are within our community. The distribution of the reports in both physical and virtual form through a wide range of channels has led to many invitations to consult and participate in other large-scale projects across the sector. A full list of these collaborations can be found at the start of our overview report, *The Ethos of Belonging: A narrative model approach to student engagement 2011–2015* pp5–10.

I have always found curriculum design one of the most satisfying and creative aspects of my academic practice. Over the course of my academic career, I have been involved with four major curriculum renewal projects where every course and every assessment task were rewritten from scratch. Although the tremendous amount of work entailed within such renewals cannot be underestimated, the chance to rethink everything that is taken for granted and, to create relevant, engaging and rigorous assignments is invigorating.

As previously outlined in Chapter 3, halfway through The Belonging Project the entire School of Media and Communication undertook a significant curriculum renewal project, locally known as MC2015. The Belonging Project was instrumental in initiating this overhaul and we all played significant roles in the specific curriculum renewal within our individual program structures. This meant I have finally been able to embed into the coursework and orientation process a number of the interventions we trialled during the pilot phase of the project, including a number of off-campus exercises, or mini cohort days out.

Given that the majority of my core teaching occurs in the first semester of first year and the final semester of third year, my work on The Belonging Project has helped me to better recognise the importance of explicitly creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. Through the project I have developed a range of practical interventions to activate these values. Simple things like standing at the door and welcoming students as they wander in with a smile and a personal ‘good morning’, compared to standing at the podium and making general announcements, has made a large difference to how students respond in class. Although none of these interventions are particularly innovative in and of themselves, each interaction is now informed by the concept of belonging and my new knowledge of the importance of the consistent application of the ethos of belonging.
Perhaps the most obvious change in my teaching has come as a result of the work I undertook on the At Home Study Tour in *Phase 4, The Global at Home: At Home in the Global* (Clarke & Wilson, 2015, p.29). One of the most significant results of this case study is the range of resources we developed to explicitly address the cultural diversity of students in the classroom. This diversity is expressed in many forms, not just in terms of a student’s ethnicity or socio-economic background, but also their learning styles and personality traits. The resources I now regularly utilise include specific class exercises and team building activities, readings that explicitly address how cultural diversity and communication styles are conceptualised within the literature, and better tools for teaching and conducting collaboration.

Another obvious change in my direct classroom teaching has been to explicitly address issues of graduate employability much earlier within the curriculum. This change is a result of the work Bronwyn completed within the GRAP2199 Case Study (Clarke & Wilson, 2015, p27). In this case study, Bronwyn introduced a range of assessment activities to her first semester, first year course that enabled students to engage with concepts of disciplinary and professional identity and to work on industry briefs with real clients. Although RMIT, as a university of applied learning, expects all programs to address employability and career building throughout the degree structure, many of us tend to leave addressing these aspects until late within the degree structure. The GRAP2199 Case Study proved to be so successful and engaging for students that we have implemented a number of the elements into the first year Media program.

Unlike many of the programs on offer within the School of Media and Communication, the Bachelor of Communication (Media) program does not have specific ties to any one segment of the media industry. This plurality, coupled with the fact that many of the academics teaching in the media program have backgrounds in critical humanities, means we have needed to negotiate a complex set of issues when helping students deal with their anxieties surrounding their employability status on graduation. Once again, I have found applying the notion of the incremental building of belonging very helpful in this context. This thinking enables me to explicitly discuss with students the benefits of studying within the discipline and most importantly how valuable their peer networks will be throughout their career and why it is important to nurture these. This year we have also begun to introduce a broader discussion about the nature of creative work and practice within contemporary culture into the program and to discuss how these discourses relate to the personal act of career-building throughout students’ lives.
The Belonging Project presented an opportunity for me to work on my first large-scale longitudinal research project and I have learnt a great deal about project management, collaboration and institutional strategy from this experience. Most importantly, I have discovered just how much personal agility and resilience are required when working on cultural change projects within large complex organisations. The complexity we faced in The Belonging Project was amplified by the regular turnover of senior university executive positions. These resulted in rapidly changing agendas of accountability and compliance, leading to reactionary, rather than proactive, policy decisions. During the project, we saw many other valuable and interesting projects come and go through a lack of agile institutional processes and will that could have turned good ideas with plenty of solid evidence into sustainable core business. The Belonging Project began, and has remained, an attempt to negotiate and present an alternative to this habit of making policy on the run by placing longitudinal thinking about the student experience front and centre.

Throughout the project we have often had to defend its integrity against the selective cherrypicking of our interventions from other parts of the University without engagement in the underlying core ethos of belonging. Within such contexts, I have learnt that keeping true to the emancipatory values of such a project can be difficult, but it is possible when you have a team of likeminded and committed people around you. The space to debrief, check ideas against your core values and recalibrate where necessary is essential. Personal and project strategies are required to weather these predictable existential storms, and it is through trial and error that I have developed many of these skills. I have also learnt the virtue of patience and holding steady. It can take a long time to change practices within organisations, and people often come to good ideas in their own time, sometimes not at all. You need both patience and resilience to wait these periods out.

One of the main strategies The Belonging Project employed, and consistently advocated for, was a grassroots approach to change. However, as the project has progressed, we came to realise that if there is to be sustainable, long-lasting change, explicit support is required from the top. Throughout the project there is no doubt we experienced very good support in the form of access to funds and substantial personal encouragement; however, when it came to the translation of the proven interventions into sustainable processes through the implementation of policy suggestions, this type of support proved more elusive, particularly in the
As we entered Phase 4 our initial source of funding unexpectedly dried up, requiring a last minute application to a new funding scheme with markedly different expectations (Clarke, Wilson & Araújo, 2015, p36).

Another of the major barriers we identified to the universal uptake of the project’s framework within the School of Media and Communication was change fatigue (Wilson, Clarke & Araújo, 2015, p36). As outlined in Chapter 3, by Phase 4 of the project all undergraduate programs within the school were undergoing significant curriculum renewal yet be implemented in 2015. Put simply, we found that most academic staff were too busy juggling the many competing demands surrounding the renewal process to engage meaningfully with The Belonging Project initiatives. On reflection we believe that our grassroots approach would have benefited from more consistent support from the School’s executive leadership.

We also experienced frustration in generating the establishment’s support to roll out the project’s findings beyond the School of Media and Communication. Even though the university invested over $580,000 in the project during the four-year pilot, it has been difficult to gain traction beyond our immediate school environment. Although Bronwyn and I experience considerable goodwill and have strong ties across the University our ongoing positions as level B lecturers meant that it was difficult to gain meaningful access to the people who make policy decisions.

How to operate strategically within large organisations has also been a skill gained through conducting this research. Universities are still largely hierarchical and deeply political. Although, as discussed in Chapter 3, there were instances where my academic position provided some additional agency, for most of the project we relied on our project champions working in more strategic positions within the University to provide the most up-to-date information. Managing our stakeholders took considerable work and our most effective strategy was to remain as inclusive and transparent as possible. Another strategy was to manage up. This entailed customising our approach to individuals in leadership positions. For example, some managers wanted considerable detail about the context and rationale of our recommendations, while others only wanted a half-page document clearly stating the risks and benefits.

This leads me to another of the key things I have learnt from this research. In order to cut through all the competing expectations within a contemporary workplace, a diverse yet consistent, range of communication strategies is required. As
discussed in Chapter 3, we engaged with a number of communication strategies throughout the project ranging from personal one-on-one conversations, small-group meetings, informal lunches for champions, large-scale presentations and annual reports through to direct correspondence in the form of emails. We found that framing requests and invitations for obtaining information, meetings, presentations and lunches using the marketing term ‘what’s in it for me’ (WIIFM) very effective. The best results still come from direct human conversation. This can be read as a form of belonging in action. When people feel they matter enough to warrant a one-on-one conversation, or invitation to a lunch or meeting, this contributes to a sense of belonging and being valued for staff members.

Many aspects of my collaborative practice have developed as a result of conducting this research. I explored many of these changes in Chapter 3, but to reiterate: my understanding of the importance of collaboration has vastly improved; the range of collaborative techniques I have skills in has increased substantially; and my appreciation of collaborative research strategies has grown. Overall I have come to recognise that I am very good at collaboration and do my best work in teams. This includes all aspects of my academic practice: teaching, curriculum design and research.

It must be noted that it appears that our patience and tenacity are beginning to finally bear fruit, as The Belonging Project’s ambitions for a whole-of-institution commitment to an ethos of belonging is gaining attention at the highest levels of the University. Although this interim period has been difficult at times and we have wondered whether the recommendations of the project and the hard work we conducted would ever be more broadly adopted by RMIT, it has proven to be a crucial time for my practice and emerging identity as a researcher. By the end of 2014 Bronwyn and I were exhausted, and the time away from directly managing staff and budgets, and overseeing what had grown to be three separate projects with a reduced team, left us needing downtime in order to adequately process and contextualise what we had learnt. We used this time to complete the final annual report (Clarke, Wilson & Araújo, 2015), to produce the overview document (Clarke, & Wilson, 2016), and present at two high profile conferences (HERDSA 2015 and STARS 2015).

The time out from day-to-day operations enabled us to notice what aspects of the project are successful and what aspects require rethinking as we start a new path on the belonging journey. The space and distance, and act of critical reflection of
writing this dissertation, have contributed considerably to our confidence in the underlying principles driving the work and we are now in a much stronger position to take on the further work required to reconceptualise the next phase as an entirely new project to help facilitate an ethos of belonging across the entire RMIT community.

RESEARCH PRACTICES

The most profound changes to my academic practice have predictably occurred through my increased knowledge and skills in relation to my research capacity. It is difficult to describe and quantify this aspect beyond describing it as a feeling of just ‘getting it’, of things just starting to ‘gel’. An analogy might be that it is similar to a series of lightbulb moments finally connecting up to reveal a clear path through the material. These feelings once again manifest as a growing confidence in both my ability to complete longitudinal research projects and development of the skills to articulate research findings within academic and non-academic contexts.

When describing my practice in Chapter 1, I indicated that I felt lucky that my passion and commitment to the value of the work we conducted within The Belonging Project had hardly wavered. What I had not always possessed was the capacity to argue the case within the range of academic contexts required if the work was to be taken seriously beyond our pilot phase. Through conducting The Belonging Project I have had to learn to engage with a vastly extended range of research methodologies and techniques, many located outside my usual disciplinary focus. These include the use of quantitative data, focus groups, research interviews, ethnographic observations and narrative methodologies.

As a humanities academic, my research practice has traditionally been centred on textual analysis, and I was initially apprehensive about using methods outside my disciplinary training. I was worried that we were not conducting the research correctly. However, as we began to gather and analyse the data produced from these new methods, we began applying the findings to our practice and my confidence grew. As a consequence I have developed a deep commitment to ensuring that in the future any new initiatives, interventions and actions are adequately evaluated using the most appropriate methods.

However, even more importantly, through conducting this research I have come to value these different methodological techniques as unique forms of communication in themselves, vital in convincing the range of stakeholders of
the value of the work. I can now confidently participate in informed, detailed conversations about the value of one form of evaluation compared to another in relation to the outcomes required. I am no longer afraid of quantitative data methods and feel confident in arguing for the value of robust qualitative approaches where appropriate.

Until writing this dissertation, I had not fully engaged with the broader discourse of practitioner-led action research and had consequently struggled to understand the implications of its epistemological claims, particularly in relation to questions of the quality of research outcomes. Through examining the methodology’s philosophical and historical lineage, I have developed a much deeper understanding of and respect for this approach, and now have a clearer and more balanced view of its strengths and weaknesses. Utilising action research throughout The Belonging Project has allowed me to renew my commitment to the emancipation and social change associated with the approach. I now better understand that what I had previously conceptualised as ‘intuitive’ practice is in fact a form of professional knowledge honed through years of in-place problem-solving or, as Schön describes, as a form of ‘knowing-in-action’ (Schön, 1983, p49). I have already begun to experience the benefits of this new knowledge in my interactions with students and colleagues who also conduct practice-led research. I no longer see practitioner-led action research as the second cousin to ‘real research’.
Conclusion

To conclude, I return to my guiding research question:

**How can the concept of belonging be used to help situate and activate my practice as tertiary academic within the contemporary university?**

I began this dissertation by outlining some of the experiences that underpin the values that drive my academic practice. I believe my own lived experience of the transformational value of higher education, together with the profound sense of belonging I experienced as an undergraduate at Deakin University Rusden in the 1990s, is directly linked to my decision to work as a tertiary academic. Ultimately my practice as an educator is driven by my desire to facilitate similar positive experiences for my students.

It is not uncommon within practitioner-led methodology to begin a project by following a hunch driven by personal values and political commitments, locating some links to existing literature and then just doing. It has only been through the process of activating a sense of belonging in the project, together with the reflection through the writing of this dissertation, that my understanding of the centrality of belonging to my overall academic practice has been revealed. Initially the idea of belonging ‘just felt right’ and it is only through investigating its specific attributes and theoretical underpinnings that I have come to fully appreciate just how much the concept offers to the higher education sector. While belonging is a theoretical concept that I discovered almost by accident, it is one that encapsulates my existing approach to teaching and, when applied more broadly to the sector, extends the transformational potential of education to many more students, particularly vulnerable ones.

While my particular take on belonging has been influenced by many of the authors cited throughout this dissertation, it has primarily formed through the work of The Belonging Project. The sense of belonging I strive to activate is one that is inclusive of difference and creates a special place to actively celebrate it. This version of belonging builds cultural and disciplinary capacity through both the formal and informal curriculum by providing cognitive motivation through
consistent and positive interactions with peers and university staff. A sense of belonging is an active pursuit and, when applied in higher education must be deliberate, incremental and consistent. I activate a sense of belonging in my own classrooms by using a series of tactics that communicate that all my students matter. As Dalton so succinctly argues:

When the communal life of the campus is welcoming, inclusive, celebrative, and open to the diverse experiences and perspectives, including authenticity … it provides an emotional infrastructure for the challenges and conflicts of college life (Dalton, 2006, p165).

In examining the growing literature of belonging, I was able to see where both the work completed within The Belonging Project and this dissertation can be situated. What we offer through the project is a unique approach to applying a holistic sense of belonging to whole-of-student life cycles and for all students. Rather than as separate and discrete pockets of good practice, we have articulated and proven, that when consistently activated in small-scale, low-cost, sustainable and discipline-specific ways, an ethos of belonging can make a significant difference to the student experience.

Through conducting this research I have gained great insight into the narrative, motivational and cognitive power of belonging. I now realise the concept has always informed my academic practice, even before I discovered the term. I have also learnt to appreciate the broader perspective that only comes with time, distance and deliberate reflection. The space between the ending of day-to-day operations of The Belonging Project’s pilot phase and the completion of the final annual reports has given us much insight into what worked and what has not worked, and what is needed if the project is to be scaled up to a whole-of-institution approach. I am by nature a fairly impatient person, so these are lessons that have been learnt through sheer grit and determination, but are all the more valued given their difficult genesis.

The project is of course not without its limitations, many of which I have documented within Chapter 3. Staffing changes within the project, competing major change projects and our substantive leadership roles within the organisation all affected the outcomes. As Thomas points out unless there is an ongoing and whole-of-institution commitment to belonging, it is difficult for pockets of good practice to survive. We also learnt that, unless staff feel a sense of belonging and connection to an institution, it is difficult for them to build this for their students.
Based on the weight of the growing evidence surrounding the positive effects of activating a sense of belonging in education, I have often wondered why the concept has not been more widely operationalised within student experience policy and procedures. I believe the project adds value to the sector through its simple logic and proven efficacy. When the student experience is holistically visualised, this enables staff to recognise where they can fit in relation to universities’ strategic agendas. If implemented well, an ethos of belonging offers academic and professional staff opportunities to play to their strengths and allows them to identify the aspect of the student life cycle to which they feel most comfortable contributing. The principle of activating a sense of belonging within each individual program or discipline allows for a commonsense, sustainable and doable form of belonging to emerge among both staff and students. As Chickering points out:

(1) We need to start with small initiatives, (2) we need to learn from these and build on them, and (3) we need to organize for sustained effort over a number of years (Chickering, 2006b, p192).

While my practice as a tertiary academic within the contemporary university sector has not undergone a sudden dramatic change as a result of The Belonging Project, I have noticed consistent and considerable improvements in my skills, knowledge and capacity across all aspects of my practice. I now feel confident in my ability to initiate and lead large scale projects through to completion and I have developed the resilience (and the patience) to cope with the time it takes for the potential of a project to be fully realised.

In conducting this research, I can report I have learnt a great deal about leadership, institutional structures, collaboration and engaging others in significant change projects. I have developed confidence in my own ability to lead and to articulate why education and engagement of students should remain one of the highest priorities for the higher education sector. I think it is a testament to the teaching philosophy I developed all those years ago that I am not yet done with either of the projects I started during this PhD. I am very much looking forward to applying the many lessons I have learnt through conducting this large scale project as I restart work on the ASPERA Online Archive.

This PhD has been a process of discovery and of trial and error to work out what action can be taken that best represents my educational values and how to render them tangible, transferable and useful to my community. It has been, at various times, exciting, confusing, exhilarating, terrifying and fulfilling and, more often
than not, all of these things at the same time. Throughout the journey, I have been fortunate to discover many likeminded colleagues who have supported, tested and helped refine these values into the project and dissertation I present for examination. However, most importantly, I have renewed my own sense of belonging within the higher education sector. The experience of conducting this research has transformed my relationship to my academic practice and I have acquired new knowledge and skills and new ways of teaching. In so doing, how to situate and activate my practice as an academic within the contemporary university have been transformed.

The research questions may have changed, my approach has most certainly changed and along the way I have discovered a theoretical concept that I believe will continue to shape the rest of my academic career. Although many changes to my practice have occurred, a number of things have remained steady. My commitment to the potential of education for transformation, and my commitment to doing all I can as an individual to ensure as many students as possible get to experience this opportunity, have only continued to grow.

To end I once again turn to Chickering, as he so eloquently states why universities are such important places:

> universities are the only social institutions that can help educate a citizenry able to function at the levels of cognitive and affective complexity the problems [facing us] require (Chickering, 2006a, p27).

It is thus appropriate, and an important act of belonging, that my last act in this dissertation is to once again acknowledge my key collaborators in my journey to this point. It would be difficult to overestimate the influence that working with Bronwyn Clarke has had on my understanding of the power of belonging and collaboration. Our shared values of inclusion, diversity and creativity have made working together easy. Our complementary skills in working out how to get things done in a complex institutional setting have meant that we have been able to claim influence in ways we never could imagine as individuals. Thanks also to David, Karli, Natalie and Lucy, also key collaborators in the most significant project of my career so far. And finally, to my supervisors Adrian and Laurene, who have worked hard to help me shape these broad-ranging and far reaching conversations into something coherent and hopefully helpful to others.
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