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## Building belonging in online WIL environments – lessons (re)learnt in the pandemic age: a collaborative enquiry

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## Building belonging in online WIL environments – lessons (re)learnt in the pandemic age: a collaborative enquiry

### Abstract

The theme of belonging in e-pedagogy gained currency in the 2000s when educational providers hastened to join the online teaching and learning boom and studies of building and maintaining a sense of community (SOC) proved central to this endeavour. Motivated by the pandemic-era necessity to convene teaching and learning online as part of a response to super-complexity as a defining feature of tertiary education in the 21st century, work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners returned to this scholarship to consider, under pressure, modes of building SOC and belonging in online spaces. Underpinned by a broadly constructivist worldview and informed by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, our COVID-age study considers what pedagogical strategies are viewed as affording learners this sense of belonging - or not. Using a collaborative enquiry to pool our perceptions and experiences from three WIL contexts, we ask how work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners build belonging in online spaces and identify strategies learners perceive as valuable. Drawing on the authors' small-scale studies of educator and learner experiences of online WIL (eWIL), our collaborative enquiry uses qualitative descriptive analysis to identify key themes in the voices of students. Advancing the scholarship, our study identifies three threads to the fabric of belonging: humanising online WIL; the importance of mentor presence; and fostering professional belonging. The study suggests that strategies impacting these three areas are at the heart of building belonging in online spaces, broadly envisaged as imagined professional communities of practice. Techniques viewed as successful are advanced as possibilities for enhancing pedagogy in online WIL communities.

### Practitioner Notes

1. eWIL is important to develop student professional learning, but they should be designed with a focus on sense of belonging.
2. The first meeting with the supervisor was found to be important and should be used to role model expectations, professional behaviours and build meaningful connections between student and supervisor/tutor.
3. Reducing the size of a student cohort is an important consideration as smaller size cohorts are conducive to building a sense of belonging in eWIL experiences, this includes the presence of colleagues in placement contexts.
4. Humanising eWIL can be achieved by teacher and supervisor presence, being responsive with communication, building trust and rapport and role-modelling professional behaviours.
5. Universities will need to consider and recognise the labour involved by staff in delivering quality eWIL and help preparing mentors to build belongingness.

### Keywords

Belonging, eWIL, online internship, Community of Inquiry, imagined professional communities, collaborative enquiry

## **Introduction: Online, remote or virtual internships and practicums**

This study considers the context of belonging in online, remote or virtual internships or practicums in online work-integrated learning, electronic WIL or ‘eWIL’ (Schuster & Glavas, 2017). We reflect on and discuss learning experiences not bound to material, physical workplaces and with significant work and collaboration online. Like workplace-based WIL, “virtual internships can serve as a bridge between academia and the world of work, a world becoming increasingly virtual” (Franks & Oliver, 2012, p. 275). Peacock and Cowan (2019) emphasise three affordances of community of enquiry pedagogy that positively impact e-learning contexts—building trust, generating meaning, and deepening understanding. We suggest that these are three key strategies underpinning fostering belonging in eWIL contexts in Higher Education. In this paper, we build on this and suggest three strategies which may contribute to attaining this goal, namely, humanising learning via dynamic interaction, collaborating with colleagues and students, and leveraging the potential of the imagination of future sites of professional membership.

Schuster and Glavas (2017) outline that, despite its non-material nature, eWIL takes such forms as virtual reality, simulations, virtual role plays, asynchronous LMS-facilitated learning, synchronous online learning, remote placements, working from home, iPortfolios, virtual meetings and videoconferencing, and online facilitated group learning. Various programmes in the last decade recognised the value these forms of experiential learning have for specific cohorts of students (Carmody et al., 2020; Franks & Oliver, 2012; Jeske 2019). Medeiros et al. (2015) catalogue benefits for students to conduct online or virtual internships: improved preparation for new or preferred ways of working in their industry; a low stakes professional experience that is safe and easily accessible and contributes to professional belongingness and networking; larger flexibility especially for equity groups; and increased student agency, empowerment and motivation. Students appreciate the capacity of the online environment to enhance the practicality of learning and the ability to then contextualise theory in practice while becoming more proactive and independent in their learning (Briant & Crowther, 2020).

Many of these elements foster belonging by evoking the potential reality of imagined workplaces as places of future belonging (Pavlenko & Norton, 2005). For educational institutions, eWIL presents the opportunity to connect with external partners and industry, affording images of themselves as belonging to various external communities (Filstad, 2019). For employers, this means they get access to students and graduates with well-developed digital literacy skills and they do not need the space to accommodate larger intake groups (Briant & Crowther, 2020). However, eWIL can impose additional hurdles and pose complications given the requirements on technology, connectivity, communication, and technical capabilities (Cureton et al., 2020). Indeed, the emergent stressors during COVID-19 highlighted the need for new communication and collaboration pathways and new ways of framing the experience that has been observed for decades (Andrew, 2020). These new pathways required constant reiteration due to the various support needs of students (Carmody et al., 2020) and changing circumstances in the higher education landscape. Where teaching intervention for face-to-face learning and internships/placements have long been examined (Patrick et al., 2008; Orell, 2011; Jackson, 2018), the move to online and virtual placements for many universities has posed a greater challenge to educators and supervisors to maintain a similar sense of closeness and engagement with their students where educators have not had the opportunity to engage in online teaching and supervision (a term we use to cover mentoring also).

Fostering belonging, we contend, is a key, and still under-researched, strategy to mitigate some of the disadvantages in eWIL. While eWIL is not new as a work-integrated learning practice, the pandemic catalysed the need to facilitate online learning experiences that support a sense of belonging between student, supervisors, and teachers that do not share the same physical environments. Where internships and practicums would normally be face-to-face, work-integrated learning activities in many areas of study were transitioned online. Students needed to familiarise themselves with how to interact with their virtual tutors, supervisors, internship colleagues and peers. They had to manage technologies, work across different time zones, manage lockdowns,

conduct work from their private quarters and still present themselves as a professional. As James and Theriault (2020) argue, educators were responsive and supportive, creating imaginative online teaching environments. These environments pivot, we contend, on belonging.

This study is a collaborative enquiry within a broader methodological framework of qualitative descriptive analysis. It explores the lived experiences of belongingness among three groups of learners—cohorts engaged with the three work-integrated practitioners who are the authors of this study. We focus on evidenced perceptions of sense of belonging in our specific WIL contexts, respectively:

- Virtual international internships of undergraduate students;
- Experiences of practice teachers in a Masters-level e-practicum;
- Undergraduate student voices tasked with reflecting on their ideal online WIL learning environment.

All are eWIL contexts, meaning technology was used to support and facilitate the administration, learning, moderation and supervision of eWIL (Schuster & Glavas, 2017). Using the Community of Inquiry Framework (Swan et al., 2009), our enquiry examines two research questions:

- How can supervisors and/or academics foster a sense of belonging in online work-integrated learning (eWIL)?
- How can eWIL contribute to a more general sense of professional belonging?

We summarise recent findings on student belongingness and eWIL experiences here. Further, we contextualise eWIL in higher education and explore short narratives that reflect our experiences with students in our particular eWIL contexts. We investigate three emergent issues: Humanising WIL by building and maintaining relationships, mentor presence, and developing professional belonging. We aim to extend the knowledge that already exists in this field as well as provide practical recommendations and future outlooks.

## **Belongingness in recent years**

Recent surveys of Australian students in higher education show a decline in student sense of belonging, a trend echoed in Europe and connected to deficit digital induction methods (Cureton et al., 2020). Using 2020 Australian Government national survey data, Tice et al. (2021) describe a decline in student sense of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors found that the sharpest decline was across all high-level indicators of student experience (access to skill development, learner engagement, teaching quality, student support, and learning resources). Tice et al. (2021) compared the Australian Government survey data with those from the U.S., where there was a similar trend of students who do not feel sense of belonging to university: “these findings indicate that students experienced a considerable drop in belongingness during the pandemic and point to student (learner) engagement as a particular problem area” (Tice et al., 2021, p. 3).

As reasons for the decline, Tice et al. (2021) claim both curriculum and classrooms are undergoing radical revision for delivery without adequate time for planning at a time of anxiety for all stakeholders. This, they maintain, caused serious disruptions to students' sense of belonging, seen as the relationship they form with teachers/mentors. If positive student-instructor relationships are predictors of belonging at university—and by extension to their imagined professional groups—then any decline in reported belongingness is alarming (Cureton, et al., 2020; Thomas, 2012; Felten & Lambert, 2020).

Rowe, Jackson and Fleming (2021) contend the environment of the WIL placement is key to a student's sense of belonging. Belonging on a placement or internship involves relationships that extend from the student and teacher model, to include how the student will interact with in the professional space - supervisors, colleagues, clients, patients, pupils and other stakeholders.

Mentors/supervisors not only welcome students in and teach them, they also facilitate relationship-building and networking with others (Patrick et al., 2008; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009; Maini et al., 2021) and are professional role models. The work of Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) in clinical placement settings offers practical insights. They found that students' sense of belonging increased where consistent and positive mentoring relationships existed. Likewise, Hodges and Martin (2020) found that transitioning to eWIL during COVID-19 impacted learners in three ways. It afforded the ability to be connected to communities, provided a sense of purpose and, most of all, revealed that sense of belonging is vital for ensuring student self-confidence and motivation. Students need to feel valued as learners, accepted as team members in a collegial work environment (Nolan, 1998), and feel a sense of control and self-efficacy (Cox & Simpson, 2016). A perceived dissonance in professional values, however, causes feelings of alienation and disengagement.

### **Belongingness**

In this study, set within three work-integrated learning (WIL) contexts in Australia, we conceive of 'belongingness' as an affective human need not merely to be part of a community, but to be accepted and trusted as a socialised member and professional, a concept dating back to Rogers's notion of client-centredness (1951). Viewed with both psychological and sociological lenses in application to teaching and learning in higher education, 'sense of belonging' is acquired experientially and remains a subjective feeling impacted by our perceived acceptance, connectedness and regard within any community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Thomas, 2012). Some individuals may be more attuned to strategies for belonging involving assertive engagement, and others more sensitive to the external requirements of the community with which they imagine or desire affiliation (Rovai, 2002). For Foster (1996), 'belonging' pivots on "an immutable *we-feeling*", *Gemeinschaft* (p. 25). In current educational research, 'sense of belonging', as quantifiable an entity as 'sense of community' (SOC), is a core focus in studies of belonging (Ahn, & Davis, 2020; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Yet belongingness, where being an engaged member of a community is an aspect of self-actualisation, remains a need high on the Maslovian scale (de Beer, et al., 2009); it is the emotional anchor of belonging.

One of the key concepts in belonging is 'sense of community', defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that learners' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Its elements are *membership*, *influence*, *fulfilment of needs* and *shared emotional connection*. This sense can be achieved through collaborative and authentic practices that build partnerships and community allegiances between and among participants, enabling the four affordances of SOC. In their study of postgraduate students' sense of community online, LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) emphasised the importance of 'belonging' for those with the motivation to belong, to maintaining group or peer work online. Their study suggests both the need for an articulated and *heard* voice in the e-community and a desire for identification with other imagined communities beyond the immediate e-environment (Pavlenko & Norton, 2005). This means both a mentor or e-moderator presence, and the impetus to belong to a future, but often still imagined, professional grouping (Filstead et al, 2019; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Tu & Corry, 2002). This impetus moves beyond the 'social presence' (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) of lingering and commenting, into solid learner-centred strategies for humanising digital learning (Andrew, 2012; Cureton, et al., 2020). Along with Cureton et al (2020), we maintain acts of humanising are reflected in the way people build relationships and communicate with each other. These social functions both build connectivity and trust and a community that fosters belonging.

Understanding one's fit within and belonging to a community is a disruptive challenge for new students, seeking groups, memberships and ways to belong (Cureton, et al., 2020; Tice et al., 2021), yet is crucial to the student experience (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Belonging is, hence, a central predictor for student success, outcomes, satisfaction, and retention (Cureton, et al., 2020; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Tinto, 2003). Sense of belonging motivates and strengthens one's commitment and

behaviour (Strayhorn, 2012); or, in its absence, diminishes motivation in professional learning contexts (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008).

Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) further developing their framework, identified three components of belongingness as a “personal, contextually mediated experience” (p. 2872) depending on individuals’ feelings of (a) security, acceptance and value; (b) integral connectedness, and (c) harmony with the group’s professional and/or personal values. These components impact positively on belonging in (e-)learning environments. In transitioning into worklife, graduates navigate new ways of belonging to their profession or organisations representing it, a task facilitated by imagining themselves as potential members of such communities during their eWIL experiences (Felten & Lambert, 2020). With the heightened focus on employability learning for the unknown future, universities can play an important role in facilitating students’ transition and belonging to the university, as well as to their professional identity development (Barnett, 2004; Dean et al., 2020).

### **Community of inquiry in WIL**

The concept of ‘imagined community’, originating in Anderson’s (1983) study of desired national identity, is valuable in any discipline with a work/real world destination in understanding the desire to belong and has been broadly applied to language education (Norton, 2001; Kanno & Norton, 2001; Pavlenko & Norton, 2005) and digital spaces (Koh, 2016). It may involve imagining the self with a qualification, uniform or ID belonging to a professional group of an organisational identity; or it may involve idealised engagement with the discourses and tools of a workplace or role as we suggested above in describing advantages of online environments for WIL. Imagined communities are conceptualised as places of the mind and heart where individuals create a sense of self through imagined identifications. Murphey et al. (2005), for instance, wrote that learners “want to belong to a community and construct their identities as members of the group, they invest energy and time into learning how to be like those members” (p. 85). Learners’ investments in imagined communities impact on their perception of their future goals and ambitions. Such goals and ambitions relate to their desire for belonging to communities and recognition as members of the professional grouping (Kanno & Norton, 2001). Positive interactions with these professional networks can foster students’ confidence and sense of belonging (Ferns et al., 2021).

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Swan et al. 2009), founded on Lave and Wenger’s communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), examines educational factors that facilitate students’ learning and engagement in the online learning environment. The three dimensions of *social presence*, *cognitive presence*, and *teacher presence* together may help to examine how students can be supported in their online learning journey. They emphasise that social connections together with reflective inquiry are essential facets of the learner experience. The CoI framework, further, refers to the ability that various mediated platforms have “for communicating the affective and emotional (the social) aspects of learning interactions” (Swan et al., 2009, p. 47). Extending this to the WIL context, Garrison et al. (2000, p. 7) observe the CoI’s first dimension of social presence links to belonging as students often “belong to a university cohort and to an organisational or project team at their internship organisation”.

Based on their research, Briant and Crowther (2020) added a fourth presence to eWIL practices, *collegial presence*, as in conducting regular meetings, getting feedback, mentoring on collaboration and teamwork strategies, enabling teamwork and supporting group-based reflections. This fourth dimension affords our study a framework that allows practitioners to move away from teacher presence to examine the wider organisational environment as influential for belonging.

Using the CoI framework with its social and collegial dimensions allows us to examine the social aspects that increased or hindered students’ sense of belonging in eWIL settings and to include their individual professional learning contexts. When applying this framework to eWIL, we must consider the various forms that eWIL can take such as online practicums, virtual internships or remote learning. Students may or may not be part of a larger cohort; they may be exposed to various forms

of communication that might not be conducive to understanding emotional cues; they may or may not be connected to instructors, supervisors, or colleagues; and international placements with language and cultural hurdles might pose additional challenges beyond this framework.

## Method

This study is a collaborative enquiry, where three WIL educator-practitioners from Australia construct stories of their learners' responses to and experiences of strategic learning in and for online spaces within a professional learning community. The main purpose of such an approach, Donohoo (2013) emphasises, is systematic examination of shared educational practices, in this case those potentially fostering and supporting belonging, to deepen understanding of these practices and the challenges entailed. This method draws on the multivocality of collaborative ethnographic approaches, enabling the voices of learners to become the shared experiences of the researchers (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). The aim is constructing common understandings and sharing experience with a view to generating shared goals (Toyashi et al., 2009). The study broadly followed the four stages of collaborative inquiry: framing the problem, collecting evidence, examining evidence, and documenting (Donohoo, 2013).

Like Ellis and Bochner (2006), Donohoo (2013) emphasises collaborative enquiry is a *multi-vocal* approach. We compile, curate, and convene three narrative sets intertwining personal and student dimensions to interrogate the intersections of our perceptions and experiences to generate fresh understandings or contribute to emerging ones (Denshire, 2014). As such, enquiry in its collaborative form offers an apt narrative methodology for representing our situated experience, bringing with us the voices of students, supervisors, academics, and workplaces. Uniting the narratives generates a process of making explicit practices that may remain occluded without the collaborative alignment (Toyosaki et al., 2009). Collaborative enquiry affords researchers the opportunity to place what is discovered alongside what is known (Donohoo, 2013). This applies a qualitative synthesising methodology where the action of juxtaposition enacts in the reader their own analytic response (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

This study utilises the enquiry of three collaborators to discuss belonging in their WIL teaching and learning contexts over a period of six months. Each author draws from individual ethics approved projects.

Beate Mueller teaches international internship subjects at an Australian university preparing students for overseas or virtual placements in companies and for service learning. Her data comprise 9 in-depth interviews with students after they completed their online internships in Malaysia, Indonesia, the UK and the US building on previous research on community building in virtual language classrooms (Mueller & Oguro, 2021).

Martin Andrew draws on data from a project within a Masters-level teacher education practicum, both onsite and, during lockdown, online. Here, he draws on 22 practice teachers' reflective diaries from a Melbourne practicum project.

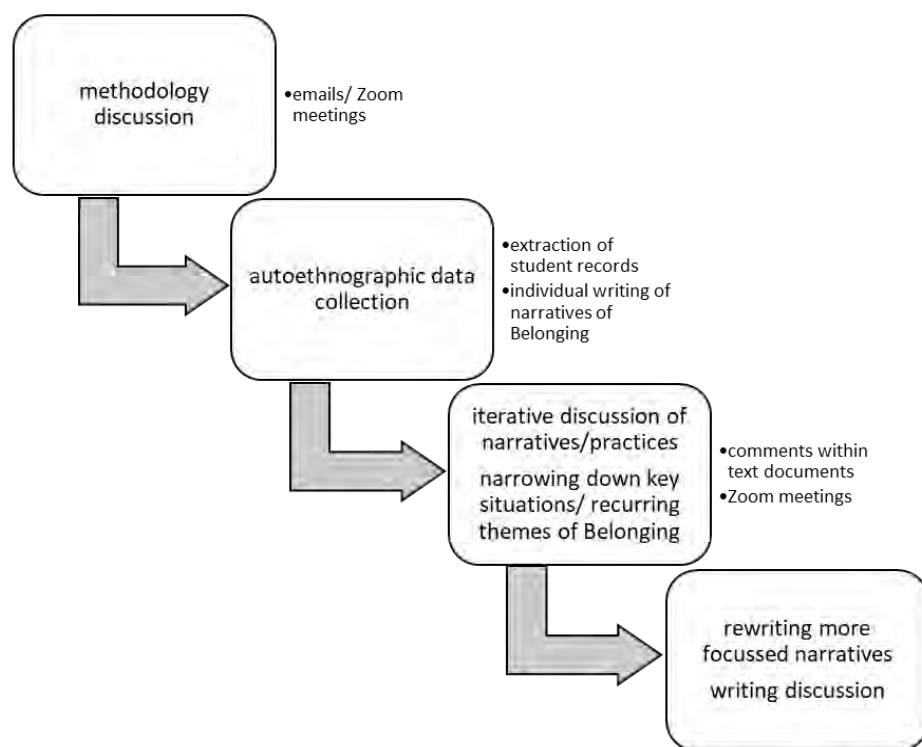
Melissa Connor is a WIL practitioner working at an Australian university, overseeing internship and career readiness courses for students studying in the disciplines of Commerce, Law and Economics and Public Policy. For this enquiry the reflections of 50 students in a final year career readiness course were observed.

We shared our memories of discussing and fostering belonging and built into our narratives the voices of learners gathered methodically from authentic reflective learner sources: reflective writing; presentation transcripts/observations, and in-depth interviews. Such multi-text and vocal methods are recognised as innovative ways of capturing and representing eclectic experiences and perceptions as 'data' (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). As we have collaborated using a similar

methodology before (Connor et al. 2021), the existing relationship, trust, and openness to share our practices significantly contributed to the collection and evaluation of the narratives below to guarantee a robust enquiry. This was the case in studies whose descriptive analytic technique we followed, such as Toyashi et al. (2009). Analytically, this method allies with crystallisation, generating and curating knowledge about a particular phenomenon (belonging in eWIL) by generating a deeper, more complex, even triangulatory, interpretation (Richardson, 2000; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The stories presented as data, then, are rewritten from raw data sources, which are occasionally cited verbatim. This act of rewriting is generative in itself in that it offers multiple perspectives on belonging in the same way that a crystal generates light from three, or more, sides (Richardson, 2000), focusing on the essential; namely, belonging.

With our small, localised samples, we generated key themes through collaborative enquiry, integral “essences”, or thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study: belonging (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Three overarching themes emerged from the inductive data analysis process: Building and maintaining relationships and trust through humanising online WIL; the importance of mentor presence; and fostering professional belonging. Through numerous iterative meetings the narratives and practices became more focused around these themes, were re-written and extensively discussed for their purpose for belonging in eWIL, and eventually became the narratives published and discussed below (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
*Methodological process*



## Our narratives

### ***Humanising WIL by building and maintaining relationships***

*First impressions.* The theme of how students became part of a community (or the lack thereof) is often present throughout their reflection of international eWIL experiences. An aspect that was often mentioned around community building and social presence was the first day and the induction



meetings being especially important. Such gatherings can set the tone for the internship and be an important step in creating a sense of belonging to the organisation, team, or project. However, this is often an occasion where mismatched expectations occur. One student talked about the induction meeting as being confusing and disappointing. The supervisor introduced staff members and the intern and then went straight into the meeting agenda. The student expected the meeting to be about them and to be a step-by-step introduction into the organisation's structures and doings. None of the tasks or expectations were clarified. This meeting would leave them with even more questions or confusion: "*After the induction meeting, I thought, so now what? I never saw anybody's face again.*" Given the time difference, the student then had to wait a full day to receive more instructions. As no other team meetings were held during the entire duration of the internship, bonding with other colleagues did not happen. The student admitted that their expectations about the virtual international internship were low; they anticipated little interaction, but this anti-social approach very much contributed to heightened feelings of isolation and reduced belonging in times where people were already socially isolated. Where trust couldn't be established, every interaction with the supervisor then felt strained and like an imposition.

*Building trust online.* The experiences of practice teachers on e-practicum, like those on other eWIL interventions, foreground the importance of trust as a precondition of desire to belong in two main contexts: in engaging candidly in discussion boards during lockdown-era online practicums, and in performing authentically and with confidence during Zoom-mediated classroom observations. The move to online practicum forced practice teachers to imagine what a classroom setting would have been like. They recognised that this move gave them the opportunity to become facilitators and mentors of 'micro-online-communities'. One strategy of humanising the experience consisted of allocating students to breakout rooms and selecting class monitors to release the logistical burden and to be able to easily move from group to group. One student reflected on these strategies by recognising the importance of building trust: "*I realised the secret to cooperative learning was facilitating belonging by building trust. One strategy was that every time a learner made a contribution, they opened with their name and one detail about them.*" There is consensus that the mere act of launching an online community will not sustain it. Indeed, investment builds over time; engagement is a function of established trust. The presence of a supportive and trusting instructor who models this in their own practice was an important and authentic learning experience for these students. Managed turn-taking in both synchronous and asynchronous transactions enables equitable access to communication spaces, and such access affords belonging.

*Modelling introductions.* To build a relationship, I heard from the students that they needed to get to know each other from the outset. By its very nature, the online classroom restricts the conditions conducive to relationship building. To facilitate this as a deliberate part of online teaching. The students suggested using at least the first class to model how to build relationships online. It is likely that this is a skill that they will also need outside the classroom as online internships, graduate interviews and remote work become more common.

The student groups focused on establishing community in their online learning by emphasising the need for participation and engagement among both students and teachers. A comment that encapsulates their feelings was "black box of boredom". The Zoom classroom had become, for them, synonymous with cameras switched off, and on the screen, a grid of black boxes standing in for their peers. It was interesting that a solution to this problem from the student presentations was the use of interactive tools and icebreaker style activities. Common amongst the suggestions for establishing community was the need for the students to get to know each other. In many ways, there was a desire to replicate the 'getting to know you' style activities from the classroom to the online mode. Students will need to understand how to best present online, how to quickly build rapport, how to appropriately respond to questions and contribute to conversations, to collaborate with others and in understanding online etiquette. In that way, eWIL and online facilitation can model online work situations and give students handy tools for building relationships and trust.

### **Mentor presence**

*Not wanting to belong.* The relationship between supervisor and intern is certainly one of the decisive factors for students to feel like they belong but can also be a main inhibitor of belongingness. My students in the international internships usually had one specific supervisor assigned to them throughout the internship. This singularity of mentor gives this person an essential role model function and a lot of power at the same time. In one instance, one student reported perceiving their supervisor as inappropriate while sharing insights into colleagues' personal lives and private issues. In meetings, the supervisor was observed to use micro-aggressions against other staff members, a practice that the intern found very disturbing. As the context was an international internship, the intern was not sure what practises were appropriate and as none of the other colleagues spoke up they felt like they could not criticise the supervisor. This resulted not only in the student's decreased sense of belonging to the organisation, but also to their entire imagined community of global professionals and citizens as they perceived the experience as disappointing and not desirable. Supervisors that are approachable, friendly and interested in the intern's learning also gave them a feeling of contributing something valuable to the company. Such mentors were described as the sort of supervisors students wanted but did not always get.

*Positive feedback.* Having a supervising teacher who is welcoming, supportive, and constructive facilitates belonging in WIL. Also, accepting students as 'future equals' and colleagues contributes to their perception of becoming a part of a professional community. Supervisors played a particular part in this process and their ability to support students through constructive feedback and support. One student reflected on their supervisors' useful feedback strategies: "*She said: 'next time, you might consider' and never spoke of what I'd done 'wrong'. Having a positive supervisory teacher made me feel that I, too, might belong to this group of helpful, positive teachers in my future*". Another student reflected on the role of individual feedback and how it contributed to community building with other students, a link that does not seem too obvious initially:

*The best part was the instructor's commentary and feedback to each individual, and her ability to pull people together with hyperlinks, so that several of us realised we had the same experience, so we were able to debrief together. This gave us a sense of community, a sense of being able to share and from this to learn, because our experience was perhaps not an outlier, but part of a broader normative pattern.*

Being faced with challenging situations and seeing how a supervisor role modelled behaviour, gave students encouragement and the confidence to pursue their chosen profession: "*I realised that the quality of the supervisor impacts one entire practicum experience*".

Students who encountered racist experiences during their practicum found themselves encouraged by their supervisors for the actions they had taken against microaggressions. One student reflected on a particular event that shows how a supportive supervisor can strengthen one's choice of career and learning in the field: "*Being a teacher who is inclusive and considers the sense of belonging of all others, I realised, was crucial to the teacher I wanted to become.*" This was due to the mentor's ability to call out the aggressor and alleviate tension appropriately. What students report they learned from their mentor teacher contributed strongly to their developing a sense of confidence, agency, and self-reliance.

*Talking into the void.* In their presentations, students reported that having a connection with their teacher was enhanced when the teacher utilised engaging and interactive pedagogy. They felt most connected to their teacher when the online classes were small. It seems that the feeling of mentor presence also suffered from the "camera off" phenomenon, with students saying that low-level conversation and input from students led to minimal input from the teacher. Having experienced recorded lectures, the students questioned why they could not receive all their learning content in the same way. Why did they need to attend synchronous online lectures and tutorials? It is a conversation that has perhaps been a long time coming for some universities. It was also common

for the teacher to use online chat and discussion board features; however less for informal chat, but more to offer consultation times and opportunities for discussion and feedback. This highlights the difficulty of replicating the ‘chance’ conversations with teachers and mentors that might lead to a more familiar feeling between teacher and student, opening networking doors and building rapport. Teachers are commonly referees and connectors between students and the industry by sharing contacts, enacting role models and representing passion for the subject.

### ***Developing professional belonging***

*Being of value.* One of the main motivational factors for undergoing e-internships of interviewed students was to get professional experience in general to get first insights into the world of work and specifically in their discipline area. This was especially important for students who had no previous experience or who did not feel confident to do an internship with a local company where they would be immediately immersed in the company’s daily doings. Several students acknowledged this fear. The actual tasks students were concerned with on a daily basis were perceived as having an important impact on students’ sense of value and belonging as a professional. Though wanting to learn how to be a professional in their field, students still expected to do tasks that were of significant use to the company and at the same time enhanced their confidence and learning. Where this was not the case, students reported that they did not feel like they could slowly grow into a professional or develop a sense of purpose or belonging to the profession especially where expectations were not met, or the internship did not match the skills developed in their degree. One student confirmed that the actual work she was doing for the organisation made a big difference for her to feel like a valuable staff member, saying “*I want to contribute something meaningful*”. This student often perceived her work as just busy work doing administrative tasks; however, when she noticed that a part of her research was actually taken over into a management plan, it gave her a greater sense of pride for her work there. Nevertheless, the experience during the internship stirred her away from a career in this field speaking to the students’ increased agency but also deep disappointment. Students who were involved in many different tasks and decision-making processes and who were given responsibilities were usually more satisfied with their internship as it gave them the opportunity to learn more and grow as a professional, feeling like they contributed something valuable to the company and their profession as a whole.

*A vision of the profession.* The aspirations to belong to a professional group and attain its title motivates practicum learners in authentic ways. First, they conceive of themselves as members of imagined communities, whether they be professional groupings or specific organisations symbolic of membership. These images of future selves can be empowering and can be leveraged to increase engagement. Second, they seek alignment with those who operate at the core of the community, persons represented by supervisors, mentors, or other models of successful practice. One student summarised how a successful internship or placement can contribute to feeling a sense of belonging to a profession: “*The practicum experience has clarified for me that my choice to study Education was right and that this is the area into which I will further my teaching career*”.

Sharing spaces, learning from others and seeing certain behaviours role modelled encouraged many students in their choices of professions: “*I was impressed not only by the openness of those who ran the organisation but also their readiness to show me some of their outputs and missions. This reaction not only led me to believe that I could work in this domain, but also that I could myself belong to an organisation such as this*”. For yet another student, the practicum broadened not just her vision of the profession, but also to the world, allowing her to access “*different kinds of interaction with different people who understand the importance of feeling included*”. There is a clear sense in the data of learners’ aspirational senses of imagined sites of belonging and identities representing fuller belonging becoming active due to their participation in on-site practicums.

*Learning anywhere or anytime.* In their group presentations, the students communicated ideas on what they wanted from the online professional learning experience to help them stay engaged with their learning and to ultimately foster professional learning and belonging. When reflecting on what

learners reported they would keep from their online learning experiences, I was struck that, for most groups, technological solutions emerged as a key theme. What the students wanted from their technological solutions was the features of flexibility; namely, fitting studies around their lives, the freedom to engage in learning ‘anywhere/anytime’ and to learn at their own pace. It seemed that when they did meet in the online classroom, they wanted that experience to be engaging and worth their time.

## **Discussion**

The following educator-researcher narratives are reflective of stories our students have shared, affording authentic glimpses into the complex and fluid web of what makes students feel they belong or not belong in different eWIL contexts. The narratives identify answers to our two research questions on how supervisors/mentors can promote a sense of belonging and how eWIL can contribute to a more general sense of professional belonging.

To answer the first question on how supervisors can foster students’ belonging in eWIL, we echo the findings of Swan et al. (2009) and Briant and Crowther (2020) on the importance of social, instructor and collegial presence as central modes of creating belonging in virtual Communities of Inquiry. We find that building a community in the online space through humanising relationship and trust building is integral to students’ sense of belonging in eWIL. The narratives show that students not only thrive in socially connected environments they feel they belong to, but they have strong expectations of the kind of supervisor and collegial relationships they find supportive. Networking and socialising opportunities as well as regular ‘meet-ups’ are examples of social and collegial presence students found conducive to feeling connected to the workplace. The way they are introduced to colleagues and inducted in their new workplaces sets the tone for social and collegial presence from day one.

An inspirational or encouraging supervisor is hugely impactful on learner engagement, encouraging imaginings of present and future belonging whereas bad role models might widen perceived gaps in values and career choices. In this we concur with a range of scholars (Patrick et al., 2008; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009; Maini et al., 2021). Formative feedback and continuous guidance are two of the functions of instructor presence that students expect and need to make the most out of the affordances of eWIL. Approachable and positive mentors who facilitate humanising communication (Cureton et al., 2020) further guide students in their journey and assign tasks that are of value to the organisation as well as to a learner’s skills growth (Ferns et al., 2021). They can assuage tensions and are sensitive to the distribution of communication space/time within a group, and they affirm individual identities, ensuring individuals are afforded opportunities to belong to the wider community.

To affirm the work of Peacock and Cowan (2019), a lack of positive role models, trust or guidance does not just result in a disappointing experience but may contribute to a learner’s questioning or withdrawing from a professional group or career altogether. If social connections and supervisor presence are absent in these online spaces, the emotional ties are missing and creative solutions are needed for supervisors when mentoring our future professionals (Gunwardena & Zittle, 1997; Swan et al., 2009; Briant & Crowther, 2020). They might offer, for instance, a welcome package with some of the organisation’s merchandising products, an ID card or badge or a welcome message in the newsletter.

Regarding our second research question, we contend that sense of belonging is linked inextricably to opening the possibility of belonging to imagined future professional communities. Here we extend from language education the applied theory of Kanno and Norton (2003) and Pavlenko and Norton (2005) into the reapplication of the notion by Ferns et al. (2021). The ability to envisage a professional identity is crucial to fostering a sense of belonging to work communities, as our learner experiences show. What is also apparent is that students seek confirmation of their professional

choices, as studying a particular program and working in a professional field are different experiences.

Those who see the placement as an authentic version of future sites of work— their imagined professional communities—are more likely to be invested in their present learning environments, whether physical or e-environments. The online benefits contribute to students finding the space and time to engage in a mode of professional learning that suits their individual circumstances. Those students feel a stronger sense of belonging to their colleagues/supervisors who perceive their tasks as useful and varied, who feel involved in decision making and organisational operations, and who were given a sense of pride and value through their achievements. However, even a confident and successful learner might not feel as adequate or prepared for work situations if social connections are withheld. Finding belonging and confirmation brings relief and increases confidence and self-efficacy (Cox & Simpson, 2016), but if professional choices are not confirmed, the consequences are more severe and longer-lasting. Online professional learning experiences can, therefore, provide low stakes experiences where students feel safer than in immersive environments and build up confidence and skills first.

The interwoven nature of themes and experiences that emerged from our narratives shows that belonging has many facets and can be even controversial. Students can feel like they belong to an organisation and yet do not want to continue with a specific professional career at the same time; they might not be engaged with challenging tasks every day, but a supportive supervisor can still make a difference; they might see online professional learning as inferior but still prefer it over face-to-face experiences. The narratives support learners' needs for connection, fulfilment, sharing values and emotions and having a voice: key facets of sense of community.

### **Limitations**

While this study only captures the experiences of three WIL practitioners and researchers, it does draw on the reflective responses of more than a hundred undergraduate and postgraduate students who have participated in online and virtual eWIL in the last couple of years. We acknowledge that our narrative methodology appears to tend towards essentializing or generalising trends in the data, but it is grounded in the robust collaborative analytic strategies of researchers. Both collaborative enquiry and qualitative descriptive analysis are methods for creating manageable scale as well as enabling multivocality as a means of triangulation. We also acknowledge that the data lacks the richness we looked for in our literature review.

### **Conclusions and implications for teaching and learning**

We contend that strategies for developing belonging in eWIL environments fall into three categories: humanising online WIL; the importance of supportive mentors; and more broadly fostering professional belonging. When educational experiences are as closely designed as possible to real life situations and problems, students may reflect on their learning experiences as more relevant and become more active in their learning (Boud & Miller, 1997). Belonging is not just linked to a particular institution or organisation but also to places to which people feel connected. These places may be imagined communities of workspace aspiration, or authentic versions of the kind of loci they might imagine as workplaces, populated with likely colleagues and pupils and operating in the discourse of the profession (Filstad, et al., 2019). The absence of social connections and colleagues that we otherwise meet in lunchrooms or after classes creates a void in many online experiences. However, this does not have to exist as we have the skills and technologies to fill these gaps when communication channels are open, students are included in meetings and decision making, cameras are on, and additional informal messaging platforms are used. Being involved in projects and meetings, doing different tasks, and being of value to an organisation are important aspects that supervisors and colleagues can facilitate. There is also certainly a role for university management to recognise the labour of staff in learning a new skill of facilitating quality eWIL learning and teaching.

This study will be useful to both teachers and eWIL supervisors in the workplace. In times of limited resources, how and where to best allocate resources to engender a sense of belonging and student success is an important consideration.

We suggest that those involved in virtual internships and eWIL should focus on the following as priorities

- Setting the ‘first day’ to orient the expectations for the student, including preparatory activities such as how to build rapport and online etiquette;
- ensuring mentors and supervisors allocate meaningful work and are knowledgeable about how and when to give feedback to students
- connecting students with colleagues and other interns to create small communities of inquiry thus generating their own social spaces;
- role modelling behaviours and best practice for students can enhance their imagination of communities to which they desire belonging;
- creating value through engaging tasks to improve students’ confidence, skills development and agency, ultimately contributing to their sense of belonging to professional communities.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

### **Ethics clearance**

The authors received ethics clearance from their individual institutions. The clearance numbers are as follows:

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