
Belonging in remote higher education classrooms: The dynamic interaction of intensive modes of learning and arts-based pedagogies

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors explore the conditions that support belonging in remote VU Block Model[®] teaching. They examine the role of arts-based, embodied pedagogy in promoting engagement in learning, connection between students, and between students and teachers, and in an environment in which vulnerability and risk-taking in learning is valued. A discussion of belonging in higher education and the practice of embodied learning is followed by the reflections of seven participants. These participants were students in a remotely taught, arts-based higher education block unit, which had been mindfully adapted to retain the embodied nature of delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. After students' participation in focus group interviews, the lead author constructed found poetry from their comments and reflections. This found poetry forms the dataset through which the questions of belonging are explored. The researchers found that when explored through the lens of the Community of Inquiry Framework, embodied and arts-based practices provided opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging, deepen understanding of lived experiences, and realise higher education and career goals. This study elevates the voices of students, providing opportunities for higher education teachers to consider the importance of belonging for student success in remote, intensive, and on-campus modes of delivery.

Practitioner Notes

1. Arts practices in remote teaching provides Arts practices in remote learning provide opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging.
2. Teacher focus on belonging significantly impacts students' experience and success in remote and intensive delivery modes.
3. Relational teaching, essential for student wellbeing during the response to COVID-19, remains a priority in remote, in person and intensive modes of delivery, especially for vulnerable student cohorts.
4. Consideration of timetabling in intensive delivery modes allows students to work together across the semester or year which enhances belonging and student outcomes.
5. Students will embrace challenges in their learning when teachers model vulnerability and the willingness to move outside of their own comfortable zone.

Keywords

belonging, arts-based practice, intensive delivery, remote learning, student wellbeing

Introduction

Course Rationale

VU Block Model[®], arts-based pedagogy, and remote learning interact to support a sense of belonging in a diploma-level course at Victoria University, Melbourne. The Diploma of Education Studies (EDES) is a sub-bachelor pathway into education undergraduate study. It admits students who have often had less than optimal experiences of schooling and yet aspire to be teachers. As lecturers in this course, our pedagogical focus incorporates arts-based and embodied learning as ways of cultivating belonging and risk-taking – belonging because this offers students support, builds confidence, and develops agency; and risk-taking because openness to vulnerability and preparedness to fail are critical to learning. The eight units (a unit is a module of learning) that constitute the diploma have similar or identical learning outcomes to the first year of the Bachelor of Education. These units cover a range of key curriculum areas: academic learning, sociology, literacy, STEM, humanities, arts, information technology, and health and physical education. The primary purpose of the course is to provide a pathway into the second year of that bachelor, though students can also pathway into the second year of a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education, or a Bachelor of Education Studies.

In 2019, EDES shifted from two 14-week semesters, each consisting of four units, to the VU Block Model (44 hours per unit, each undertaken in 4 weeks). Students study all eight VU Block Model units sequentially, with the same class group, with the aim of building connections with their peers and belonging to the course and the university. Initially, the move to the VU Block Model presented challenges. The teaching staff assumed that students need time to shift their understandings of education and their perceptions of themselves as learners. However, the move to the VU Block Model, while reducing the longitudinal time in a unit, increased the depth of time. Units were restructured and redesigned for the VU Block Model. Concepts that had been developed over weeks in the previous iteration were now explored intensively in shorter periods. Rather than having heavy reading loads, the arts-based teachers in the course advised on embodied learning and arts-based pedagogies as ways of engaging with new ideas in all units. Arts-based pedagogies include such things as drama games, role-play, scene building, and physical drama, as well as responding to and creating music, dance, poetry, and visual and media arts. It became apparent that active learning in short bursts was very effective for this cohort of students. COVID-19 introduced the combination of remote learning and the VU Block Model, and a new set of challenges. Units were redesigned to ensure that embodied and arts-based learning remained as pedagogical priorities, although many would consider them to be counterintuitive to learning through a screen. Our 2020 cohort did only one unit in person; most of our 2021 cohort did not set foot on campus – and yet students reported a strong sense of belonging.

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The gains and losses of teaching during the response to COVID-19 has far-reaching implications for all sectors of education (Gourlay, 2021; Hodge et al., 2020). Remote learning has become a viable delivery method in higher education. In this context, higher education institutions must ensure that opportunities are still provided for relational community building, as it significantly impacts engagement, retention, and student success (Strayhorn, 2019). In EDES, we continue to offer one remote learning group for students juggling work and/or family, or who live in regional areas. With careful consideration of unit design and pedagogy, we have moved beyond emergency remote learning that was necessary during the response to COVID-19 (Hodge et al., 2020). Although the impact of embodied arts-based learning on critical, creative, and collaborative thinking is well documented (Burke, 2020; McLaren et al., 2021; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Pettit, 2019), very little research has been conducted on arts-based embodied learning in the remote learning context because it is rarely adopted in practice (Burke, 2020). This study presents an opportunity to explore student experiences and the impact of pedagogy on belonging and engagement in both the VU Block Model and remote learning contexts. This paper focuses on the first unit of study in the diploma, designed to create strong connections in class groups and set students up for success in the course.

In this paper, we outline what we have learnt about belonging and student success from VU Block Model and remote learning. How have these two entangled ways of teaching highlighted aspects of the impact of belonging on student experience and student learning? We wonder how arts-based embodied pedagogy might enhance student belonging in remote learning and intensive contexts. We question whether the interaction of the VU Block Model and remote learning impacts student wellbeing and particularly students' sense of belonging. Although undertaken with a small number of students, we believe this study can inform practice in remote classes, both in intensive learning and semester mode. This study highlights the impact of embodied learning on students' developing sense of professional identity and their lived experience of academic inclusion.

We acknowledge that it is impossible in any research to avoid bias. The methodology of this study requires an emotional response from participants and researchers. Learning and teaching is emotional and relational work. We make no apology for bringing emotion into this study and for acknowledging it when it is a powerful agent in participants' experiences.

Literature

Sense of belonging has a positive impact on higher education student success (Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019; Syska & Pritchard, 2023; Tice et al., 2021). The researchers intentionally use arts-based embodied pedagogies and structure VU Block Model diploma classes (Konjarski et al., 2023) to help students facilitate strong connections with peers and academics, as students develop their academic skills. This literature review focuses on three key themes: sense of belonging, belonging in online learning environments, and embodied pedagogy and arts-based practice. The literature review concludes by synthesising these three themes, highlighting implications for the study.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging is part of our everyday vernacular. We speak of places where we belong and lament the times we didn't feel at home (Wright, 2015). Belonging is both affective and cognitive; we feel

emotions even when we think about belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Belonging may refer to a physical place or exist in the absence of one (Wright, 2015). This literature review embraces a multidisciplinary approach to belonging that encompasses Yuval-Davis's (2011) politics of belonging, Strayhorn's (2019) conceptualisation of higher education belonging and Wright's (2015) proposition that belonging is both "human and more-than-human" (p. 403). These viewpoints become the backdrop for consideration of belonging in the remote learning classroom.

Yuval-Davis (2011) states that belonging is an "on-going project" of becoming, only possible in a safe space where individuals have permission to express emotions or ideas contrary to the group (p. 6). Belonging provides students with the confidence and emotional capacity to respond to injustices – those they experience themselves and those they witness – shaping their identities as individuals and professionals. Belonging is enmeshed in identity and personal narrative. Furthermore, belonging is socially constructed; we form our identities as part of our community, and community identity evolves in response to the intersection of personal identities (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Students need space to express their identity and forge new ideas without losing connection. The students who provided the data for this study are academically vulnerable. The sociocultural differences and neurodiversity of the cohort, along with their perceptions of themselves as lesser than their bachelor counterparts (Gilmore et al., 2019), mean their narratives of capable learner and future teacher are just emerging. The safety of belonging is the foundation for this transformation (Strayhorn, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Strayhorn (2019) defines a sense of belonging in higher education as "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community" (p. 4). Strayhorn (2019) asserts that belonging is the precursor to student achievement, particularly important in "certain contexts", at "certain times" and with "certain populations" (p. 34). This study is firmly located in this context: starting university, during a pandemic, with a precarious perception of self as a successful learner. The absence of campus culture and the physical opportunity to meet peers was an immediate challenge to the development of belonging.

Wright (2015), an Australian critical geographer, draws upon Indigenous perspectives, offering insight into the connection between place and belonging. As Wright (2015) states, belonging is "humans and more-than-humans, creating place, and place creating us" (p. 403). When home environments are unsafe, schools provide community, connectedness, and wellbeing for vulnerable students (Brown et al., 2020; Marshalsey & Sclater, 2020). Remote learning prompts us to consider that the place where we belong may be a way of learning rather than, or in addition to, a physical location (Karlstad Kommun, 2023). In addition, we can consider our relationship with non-human agents, such as computers or home offices, to reconceptualise the virtual learning place (Fawns et al., 2019; Gourlay, 2021).

When EDES moved to Zoom during COVID-19, some students and academics were able to embrace this virtual environment, forging relationships and building knowledge through the non-human place. For others, fluctuating internet connection, blank screens, and muted microphones led to feelings of isolation and diminishing confidence. This exacerbated mental health challenges already triggered by COVID-19 (Farber & Rutter, 2021; Marshalsey & Sclater, 2020). As the learning environment and belonging are vital for student success, the reinvention of pedagogy for the remote learning classroom was imperative. The VU Block Model provided an excellent

structure for the transformation of the work. It supported the speedy development of relationships because students and teachers spent 12 hours a week in each other's (virtual) company. This intensity of time, particularly when students were in lockdown, fostered the creation of communities of learning. Online higher education research, especially the Community of Inquiry Framework (CoIF; Swan et al., 2009), discussed in the next section, offers insight into belonging in remote learning contexts.

Belonging in Online Learning Environments

Online undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications are increasingly offered by universities to meet market demand (Burke, 2020). Prior to COVID-19, online students primarily studied asynchronously, engaging with learning materials, often with little synchronous connection to peers or teachers (Delahunty et al., 2014; Stone & Springer, 2019). Swan et al.'s (2009) CoIF conceptualises and evaluates the shift to distance education (Cutcher & Cook, 2016; Peacock & Cowan, 2019). CoIF is grounded in the educational philosophy of Dewey: individuals create meaning through interaction with the learning community, retaining the emphasis on social constructivism (Swan et al., 2009). CoIF consists of three overlapping areas: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Together, these create the educational experience (Swan et al., 2009). Cognitive presence refers to opportunities to "make meanings and deepen ... understandings", social presence focuses on "open, meaningful communications", and teacher presence is the "ever-present facilitative role provided by a caring, trusting, and engaged tutor" (Peacock & Cowan, 2019, p. 71). Regular synchronous sessions and collaborative tasks linked to assessment are instrumental in the development of peer relationships, promoting acceptance and self-worth and feeling valued within the group (Peacock et al., 2020). Intentionally planning for real-time human connection was essential to students experiencing a sense of belonging during the response to COVID-19 (Syska & Pritchard, 2023).

COVID-19 highlighted the digital divide, especially for students from low socio-economic and culturally diverse backgrounds (Miller et al., 2021). During lockdowns, students and teachers juggled at-home study and work, often while supporting their own "learning from home" children, all with a less than optimal internet connection. Tice et al. (2021), through their analysis of the Australian student satisfaction survey, highlight the substantial impact that COVID-19 had on student experience, belonging, and student skill development, with student engagement, already of concern, down by 27% during 2020 (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2021). They recommend strategies that include smaller lectures, use of breakout groups, and availability of the lecturer before and after class (Tice et al., 2021). Victoria University retained their VU Block Model with the use of Zoom classrooms. Online collaborative tools and breakout rooms provided scope for peer-to-peer interaction. In EDES, retaining and transforming arts-based and embodied pedagogy in the remote learning context was central to understanding the relational nature of teaching and learning (Farber & Rutter, 2021; Miller et al., 2021). On the 2020 national survey, EDES learner engagement was 79% satisfaction, 28% above the national comparison for teacher education and only 5% down on 2019 figures, with EDES the top performing course in the university with an overall satisfaction of 92% (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2021). It is apparent that academics in this course are utilising strategies that go beyond conventional online teaching pedagogy.

Embodied Pedagogy and Arts-Based Practice

The first unit in EDES (EDC1000, Academic and Professional Learning), the focus of this paper, seeks to disrupt existing power structures in education (Freire, 1970/2000; Pettit, 2019). The unit incorporates embodied pedagogy (McLaren et al., 2021; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Snowber, 2016), arts-based practices (Arnold, 2019; Leavy, 2020), and transformational pedagogies (McLaren & Arnold, 2016; Pettit, 2019), and asks students to participate in creating an ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005). Nguyen and Larson (2015) define embodied pedagogy as “learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction” (p. 332). Critical and feminist theorists, including Yuval-Davis (2011), Ellingson (2017), and Wright (2015), aim to disrupt the body–mind dichotomy as the means to understand and experience power dynamics. Embodied pedagogy draws upon the philosophy of Dewey and Freire, who both articulate learning as variations of “unified mind/body” (Nguyen & Larson, 2015, p. 332). For Dewey, the focus is on full sensory experience to construct knowledge; for Freire, unification allows for critical reflection and action, essential to problem-posing education (Nguyen & Larson, 2015). Embodied methods provide opportunities for students to reflect on their previous experiences and consciously enact change (McLaren, 2021). Crews and Allinson (2022) note that creative practices can result in resourcefulness and resilience, and support teachers and students to engage with future situations. The implication here is that disruption and arts-based pedagogies can work together to impact the transformative experiences of both students and teachers.

Arts-based practices, like embodied pedagogy, are often used to reveal invisible “power relationships”, challenge “dominant ideologies”, and “raise critical race or gender consciousness” (Leavy, 2020, pp. 24–25). Arts practice facilitates profound moments of personal learning (Arnold, 2019), communicates emotions challenging to express in words (Hodge, 2019), and promotes dialogue and empathy (Leavy, 2020). Arts-based learning is embodied; we create, collaborate, and respond to art through our whole-body selves (Burke, 2020; Ellingson, 2017; Snowber, 2016). Play drives exploration of topics of societal significance (Skilbeck, 2017) to develop critical consciousness (Arnold, 2019; McLaren, 2021; Nguyen & Larson, 2015). In EDC1000, through the use of drama and play, students learn to value process over product, challenge existing constructs of learning, and connect to their own innate power and joy (McLaren et al., 2021). For arts teachers, accustomed to the vibrant, collaborative, and at times chaotic classroom, online learning feels disembodied and disconnected (Burke, 2020). Without careful integration of embodied activities, students would learn “*about* the arts ... without actually *experiencing*” the arts (Burke, 2020, p. 4). Commitment to curriculum transformation and acknowledgement that teaching and learning is relational are key to the success of online arts programs (Cutcher & Cook, 2016).

Implications for Practice

To date, very little research synthesises the fields of belonging, online learning, intensive modes of learning, and embodied pedagogy. Arts-based practices and embodied pedagogy are effective approaches for deep reflective learning, self-empowerment, and empathy cultivation (Leavy, 2020; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Pettit, 2019). Despite their effectiveness, these practices are not widespread in higher education and rarely employed in intensive delivery classrooms, especially during remote learning. The authors of this paper consider these practices to be critical in our

cohort. EDES provides opportunities for students from under-represented communities to become teachers and role models for their own students, mirroring the diversity of society (Gilmore et al., 2019). Embodied pedagogy, art-based practices, and sense of belonging are the foundation for this transformation. Although there are several factors interacting in this study – intensive learning, remote learning, and social conditions – the authors invite teachers to reflect on the ways in which arts-based pedagogies can be applied to support belonging and conceptual learning beyond the arts-learning classroom.

Method

This paper applies an established pedagogical theory, the CoIF (Swan et al., 2009), to measure the success of specific pedagogies in advancing a particular set of goals in the context of remote and VU Block Model learning. Data were gathered for the study from qualitative semi-structured interviews in focus group settings and arts-based research in the form of found poetry (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Faulkner, 2017; Patrick, 2016).

Participants

This study includes students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, and students who identify as gender diverse and neurodiverse. Recent graduates of EDES who completed EDC1000 in remote learning either in August 2020 or February 2021 were invited to participate. Of the 35 students who met the criteria for participation, seven graduates between the ages of 20 and 40 responded to the email invitation. Despite a history of anxiety, depression, or learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or ADHD, all are high achievers who accepted a pathway from EDES into a Bachelor of Education with successful completion of the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education and a weighted average mark above 80. While a more diverse age range of participants would have been preferred, the response from mature age students was not surprising, as they represent 48% of the cohort. Although they were all mature age, they otherwise represented a diverse cross-section. The students in this study were first in family, from CALD backgrounds, and/or resided in low to middle SES areas. The criterion requiring students to have completed the course was to limit power imbalances between the interviewer and the students, and to support ethical conduct of the study. As participants were recalling experiences from 12 months earlier, key experiences had had time to crystallise, and participants had had time to process their experiences. COVID-19 lockdowns were still continuing during the time of the interviews, and students had not yet returned to on-campus study.

Semi-structured Interviews

Two focus group interviews (three in one interview, and four in the other) were conducted in 1-hour sessions over the Zoom online platform, providing opportunities for undergraduate students to share experiences with their peers. Zoom met logistical considerations during pandemic lockdowns and mirrored the experiences of remote learning classrooms. It allowed participants to openly share in the focus group and acknowledge the responses of others through gestures and verbal affirmations. The private message chat feature offered participants the option of privately disagreeing with their peers. As interviews were video-recorded, these multidimensional experiences were captured in interview transcripts. Questions were constructed around the

following areas: initial perceptions of the unit, impact of arts-based activities on their experiences, and relationships with peers and teachers, both in the first unit and throughout their diploma. Students also discussed their readiness and goals for the future.

Arts-Based Research – Found Poetry

Arts-based practices can express the complexity of lived experiences powerfully and succinctly (Hodge, 2019; Patrick, 2016), breaking down power structures to represent the voices of the marginalised (McGarrigle, 2018). Found poetry as a method involves “highlighting exact words from interview transcripts” to represent the narrative and emotional impact of participants’ lived experiences (Faulkner, 2017, p. 215). The attributes of lyric poetry – “imagery, rhythm, sound, and layout” – encapsulate moments in a non-linear fashion, eliciting an embodied emotional response in both participants and audience (Faulkner, 2017, p. 218). Found poetry distils understanding in a similar way to thematic analysis while including an element of affect. As the writers of this paper believe that learning is relational and engages the learner emotionally, found poetry assists us to connect with the nuances of the participants’ experiences. Participants’ comments in focus groups can support or explain the found poems. The data used here include both the found poems and direct quotes from the focus groups. Representing stories poetically was a way to encapsulate the essence of their narrative and consider the impact of pedagogy on belonging.

Data Analysis

Individual interview transcripts were constructed for each participant from focus group transcripts and analysed using a combination of narrative accounts as found poetry (Faulkner, 2017) and visual analysis (Riessman, 2008). Gestures, pauses, and other observable qualities from session video recordings added nuance to poetry and participant demographic profiles. In addition, three of Faulkner’s (2017) poetic evaluative criteria – “narrative truth, embodied experience and transformation” (p. 225) – were used to construct authentic participant narratives. The discussion section connects the narrative to the cognitive, social, and teaching presences, cornerstones of the CoIF (Swan et al., 2009). Cognitive presence is explored through the analysis of arts-based embodied practices and their impact on engagement and learning (Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Pettit 2019). Teaching presence is explored by understanding the role of the teacher in creating an environment that merges “playfulness and seriousness” (Skilbeck, 2017, p. 1) while supporting students during the intensive nature of the VU Block Model and during the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic (Farber & Rutter, 2021; Miller et al., 2021). Social presence is explored through analysis of opportunities for collaboration and their contribution to deep learning and belonging (Peacock et al., 2020).

Ethics Approval

This study was considered low risk, and permission was granted from Victoria University’s Low Risk Human Research Panel (approval number HRE21-048). All participants opted in, signed consent forms, and were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality. The bounds of confidentiality and anonymity in focus groups

was clearly communicated to participants, and risks were mitigated through the establishment of clear expectations with other participants in the interview (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Private communication via the Zoom chat was confidential and excluded from transcripts.

Study Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

The inclusion of visual data provided additional data sources, aiding data triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) and dimensions of storytelling (Riessman, 2008). Participants were sent session transcripts and poetry to clarify their contributions to the emerging narratives through member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Hodge, 2019). Some participants expressed significant levels of Zoom fatigue that may have coloured tonal and gestural analysis. One-on-one interviews would have provided scope to develop the narrative through additional questions and ensure the authenticity of participant experiences. Poetry as data analysis may omit key elements of transcripts (Patrick, 2016). Future studies should aim to also represent the voices of school leavers.

Results

What follows are seven participant profiles and poems. You are invited to read these aloud to experience the sounds and quality of the words in your body. Reading aloud helps us hear the participants' voices and gain a deeper understanding of the interwoven experience of narrative truth, embodied experience, and transformation (Faulkner, 2017).

Vicky

Vicky returned to study to fulfil her goal of becoming an English teacher while juggling homeschooling three children. This poem identifies vulnerability as the bridge to connection. There was laughter as we discussed the surprise of drama. The emotional impact of being understood by a relational teacher was evident in her voice and eyes. This poem is about transformation – who she is becoming as a teacher, her growth throughout the diploma.

I can talk someone's ear off
but I'm not going to sing for you (laughs) ...
or dance, it's just not me
I had to adapt, it was necessary
if I had a choice, I wouldn't!
draw people in, get them involved
out of our shells
work together!
everyone's a bit easier to relate to
when you see someone's vulnerability
you know that person

lockdown learning
classes got me through
I had class, people to talk to

not just sitting at home
I had social interaction
I belonged

teachers have a story
if you know who THEY are
they appreciate who YOU are
where you come from
you're multidimensional
you connect

my younger years
shaped me as a person
my past traumas have guided me to become a teacher
steering the car from the back seat!

what are my REAL motivations?
growth
now I understand
who I'm becoming
A TEACHER

Devyn

Devyn is open about her ADHD and her sexuality. She admits that school would have been different if her challenges were understood. She speaks in metaphors – darkness in her childhood, the sun rising on a new day. Devyn's approach to life was contagious. Storytelling is a whole-body experience – at times a whisper, deeply reflective, or larger than life. Her words were mirrored with gestures and vocalisations. Devyn may not do drama, but she is a performer.

I did an online degree a thousand years ago!
I dropped out
I have ADHD
without a teacher hovering, I get side-tracked
Uni second time round
lockdown is kind of cool!
nobody knows I am in my jammies!

I didn't expect dancing and theatre
It was fun!
I don't have to be serious
I can be a bit loosey-goosey
have a joke with my classmates

I was that nerdy kid at school
can't I just read my book?

drama opens you up
when everyone else is doing it –
I CAN do it too.

Being in front of your students
is like being on a stage
you've got your lines
you've got to interact with your crowd
we've all got our roles to play

I've kept my ADHD aside for SO long
sharing helped me understand
it isn't a disability
I just get distracted – forget to do things
I get to the end of my story
just not in a straight line!
it's normal – who needs a label?

open up, share, learn, feel
a little bit of heart
makes the essay better

lockdown
I remember
I can go to class
I can see new people
I belong to this diploma
I belong with these classmates

Emma

Emma, the youngest member of the study, wants to be a primary school art teacher, a role model for her students. Emma is a positive energy who hides her mental health challenges, creating space for others to share their stories. With emotional depth, she transported us to the memory of creating the play and her emerging sense of teacher identity. There was the awareness of choosing to connect over technology – the more-than-human bringing us closer to our humanity.

I am a late riser
roll out of bed, click the button
but on campus –
you collaborate better!
back to Zoom was a bit of a bummer

I didn't expect drama
it was a good surprise
a bit daunting

the nerves went away
performance gets you animated
hold on to that when I start teaching

I am a transparent person
But opening up is scary
and it pays off
you connect, become friends
I had an awesome 'play' group.
we connected
appreciated our differences, our stories

one member wrote a beautiful song
it made me emotional
sharing our plays
I'll remember it fondly
for a long time

remote learning in your house
no obligation to have your camera on
leave whenever you want
connection with your peers
connection with your teacher
makes you feel more human
during a crazy time

Rhys

Rhys, an artist and pianist, grew up feeling different from peers. He worked as a missionary in the Philippines and speaks Filipino at home. His goal to teach was influenced by the racial prejudice he experienced at school. Being understood and accepted equals belonging. When we got off track, he bravely returned the group to what mattered most: "I remember the laughter, the good times". They laughed in affirmation. There was connection in that moment.

we were all in lockdown
we could relate to that
we can't chat in real life
but we can chat on Zoom
and on Facebook!

I wasn't expecting drama
cameras on
moving active, thinking active!
that connected – for me!

we wouldn't be as close

if we didn't do this together
a personal experience
shared in a play
helped me grow
helped me connect

respect – for my teacher
new perspectives
teaching and art
remember the bar that was set
remember laughing with peers
let's be honest
there's a lot of good times!

Dylan

Dylan's dyslexia and ADHD were identified as a child. A dedicated primary school teacher ignored his "history" and taught him to read in 2 weeks. Dylan is a support worker for at-risk youth. He communicates with wit, honesty, and intensity, affirming the contributions of his peers with smiles and enthusiastic nods. For Dylan, with a history of dyslexia, the development of his writing was extremely important. He has a clear vision for his future, grateful for the opportunity.

you couldn't study in person
it is either this – or don't study!
a good group helped
difficult without cameras

I thought
essays, PowerPoint
a lecture ... and a tute!
I didn't know about Zoom, or breakouts
But it worked for engagement
Facebook, chats
meet different people
find your people

I could make a video! Fun!
I still had to write about it.
and academically reference
ten years since I've written an essay!
it developed my writing
my confidence
my focus
I really enjoyed the diploma
bachelor's next year!

Liam

Liam, the oldest participant in the study, juggled units while homeschooling his two sons. School was challenging; he was labelled, his educational needs invisible. Music was his escape. Humour diffuses his seriousness. He wants to do well academically. His tone shifts; he hesitates, acknowledging frustrations with less focused students, but there is warmth, acceptance, and gratitude for his friends. He is learning to be the teacher he needed.

it blew me away how much people shared
maybe it's a generational thing?
that's just not me, but it's pretty cool!
diverse people, different values
I can take over ... must pull back!

I want to get 100% ... every time!
I can talk, I can write
but academically write?
assessments were creative – and academic!
rip out the fluff – boom!
I write well now ... good feedback helps!

90% of Zoom is the tutor
they demand engagement
cameras on
get the best out of students
trust is built

people I connect with
a diverse group
we disagree
that's brilliant!
new perspectives, from others' perspectives

Vithu

Vithu is Khmer, representative of 90% of the Cambodian population. Australian born, he grew up hearing stories of genocide and the exploitation of children. He speaks metaphorically – beyond my shell, unpeeling, in the deep end. He becomes expressive and confident as we progress. Gestures heighten the visual impact of his words. As a gay Khmer man, being seen, heard, and understood is fundamental to his quest: to make a difference to Cambodian children.

I am reserved
online I can listen
come into myself
privately
progressively

get high scores
my benchmark for what's possible!

students – at the centre
interactive, engaging, hands on
a surprise!
traditional learning flipped on its head

I can come off a certain way
when I unravel
there's a different person!
bring down barriers – challenging!
unpeeling ourselves
if it wasn't for remote learning
it would be too much!

engaging, positive teachers
do our best
build relationships
vulnerable! open up!
thrown in the deep end
bond, struggle and achieve together.
know each other on a deeper level

diverse friendships
we shouldn't get along – society tells us that
when we delve deeper
beyond face value
everyone is heard
everyone is understood
room for growth
where we can evolve

Discussion

Poetry in this study expresses the impact of arts-based embodied practices on engagement and learning in the remote learning classroom. Although belonging is not explicitly mentioned in every poem, participants comment on the significance of their peer and tutor relationships. In this discussion, we begin by exploring participants' remote learning expectations, contrasted with their actual immersion in the embodied VU Block Model Zoom classroom. Experiences will then be analysed through the lens of the cognitive, social, and teaching presences of the CoIF with a focus on belonging in online learning (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Emerging themes include belonging and friendship, vulnerability in learning, shared reflective practice, and developing professional identity.

Participant Experiences of VU Block Model Remote Learning

All participants in the study were expecting EDC1000 VU Block Model remote learning to be a traditional online learning experience, punctuated by lectures, PowerPoints, and essays to write. For Devyn, Emma, and Rhys, online learning was convenient. Vicky preferred remote learning; she could focus on her goals while supporting her children, also learning remotely. All participants were surprised by the emphasis on embodiment and arts-based activities, including the collaborative creation of a play, over Zoom. Participants were out of their comfort zone with drama activities, agreeing that engagement was positively impacted by the inclusion of these activities. Sometimes this was expressed explicitly during the focus group conversation with others nodding in agreement. Vithu notes, “it was more interactive, evident of the focus of engaging students”. Rhys clearly articulates the value of embodied learning: “cameras on, moving around, we got ourselves and our thinking active”. This connection between moving the body to shift thinking reinforces the embodied pedagogy philosophy that emphasises the power of the body to help understand abstract concepts (Nguyen & Larson, 2015). Devyn remarked that classes were fun, and she enjoyed having “a joke with classmates”. Emma notes that the drama activities were initially daunting, but “the nerves went away” – important for reserved students leading up to the ethnodrama creation.

The unit disrupts tightly held power structures in society and in higher education, helping students to reflect on their past experiences of educational inequality, rehearsing the change they wish to make in the world (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1970/2000; McLaren, 2021; Pettit, 2019). Students noted that this was unsettling, different from the traditional notion of school. Crew and Allinson (2022) address the question of enacting belonging, noting that it must be experienced by the participants, not imposed, assumed, or simply strategised for. They suggest that the ways individuals experience belonging need to be articulated, so that the group can negotiate the actions of inclusion, taking individuals’ perspectives into account. Acknowledging students’ differing experiences, biases, and values, while honouring their stories, provides opportunities for students to express vulnerability. Many participants comment on this theme of vulnerability, with Vicky expressing this eloquently: “I don’t think you can really know someone until you see their vulnerability”. VU Block Model provides opportunities for vulnerability to be valued in teaching because students and teachers spend extended periods of time together (12 hours per week). Relationships form quickly in this context, and students become interdependent in their learning.

Arts-based pedagogies are more carefully designed than simply using an arts experience in the class. Arts-based pedagogies and true embodied learning require an ongoing commitment to understanding that learning is in, of, and through the body, and engages senses and emotions. The intensity of the VU Block Model means that students either engage deeply in the work or flounder in a sea of material they cannot process. Arts-based learning and the VU Block Model align well in structure and pedagogy. It is the two working together that had an impact on these students in remote settings.

The Community of Inquiry Framework

The dynamic interactive of the cognitive, social, and teaching presences of the CoIF reinforces collaboration, reflective practice, and the development of critical and creative thinking (Swan et

al., 2009). Peacock and Cowan (2016) highlight the intersections of the presences, categorising these as the influences of meaning-making, deepening understandings and trust, all facilitated by an engaged tutor. As EDES was delivered through synchronous Zoom classes, this mode of delivery is the focus of the discussion.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence addresses learning, reflexive practice, and the deepening of conceptual understanding (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Reflexive practice is central to assessments in the unit. Students share their educational story, exploring the connection between their past schooling and their decision to become teachers. Vithu highlighted the benefits of Zoom for more reserved students: “I could listen in, come into my own self and do my assessment privately”. This unexpected benefit of online learning provided safety for the first assessment as students connected their stories to an existing, or personally created, artwork. Vicky became quite emotional as she shared her story with us, stating that it was “confronting, but at the same time, a huge growth thing” because it clarified her purpose to become a teacher. Devyn remarked that the unit helped her appreciate her ADHD: “I understand why I’ve done things the way I have”. Rhys was able to understand the capacity of the arts to gain new perspectives on his past experiences. Far from being devoid of academic rigour, through ethnodrama and reflexive practice, students develop their academic writing skills as they critique personally significant inequalities in the education system (McLaren, 2021). Vithu’s dream to return to Cambodia as a teacher, Dylan’s desire to reach students with learning difficulties, and Liam’s goal to help unseen students through music are all examples of learners empowered to create change in their communities. These three participants focused on getting good grades, but their motivations extend beyond themselves in the intersection of personal and community narratives. Emphasis on reflection and connecting self and learning were key components in the unit, which can be transferred beyond both the VU Block Model and remote learning, if the conditions supporting vulnerability and risk-taking are in place.

Teaching Presence

Peacock and Cowan (2019) highlight care for students, understanding of their difficulties, and the desire for them to do their best, as key to tutor presence. Facilitating the learning environment over Zoom is complex, even before the incorporation of arts-based embodied activities that require teachers to take pedagogical risks. Students are often reluctant to turn on their cameras because it feels invasive of their privacy or makes their internet unstable. Teachers are juggling screen sharing and breakout groups, all while attempting to make the learning personally meaningful, socially connected, and academically challenging. All participants in the study stress the importance of their teachers. Liam believes that “90% of Zoom is the tutor”; Vithu added that you need a teacher who was “positive and wanted students to be engaged and work together and inspired all students to do their best”. All participants agreed that the enthusiasm of their teacher was important in a unit that asks students to be vulnerable. They note that the balance of laughter and openness is important. As teachers, we want students to be brave – to dance, act, sing, and share their story – which means we must be willing to do the same. These collective experiences create a collective narrative that contributes to belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Vithu explains that

“everyone was heard, everyone was understood. There was room for growth and discussion. It was an inclusive and safe environment that built very mature relationships”. This is a clear affirmation of the impact of brave, relational teachers.

At the intersection of cognitive and teacher/tutor presence is the influence of deepening understanding (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). This includes opportunities for feedback and feedforward, and the connection of practical experience with theoretical concepts. Difficulty and effort were expected. In EDC1000, “the creative personal nature of assessments made them accessible” (Vithu), but effort was still required to “write very succinctly” (Liam), and “correctly academically reference” (Dylan), setting the “benchmark for future units” (Ryan). This unit consistently performs above a 4.5/5 on student evaluation of units, regardless of the mode of delivery, indicating that teachers are able to navigate the delicate balance between the cognitive and relational/social elements of the classroom. Sense of belonging, acceptance, and shared interests are integral to a collaborative environment that leads to academic achievement. The tutor sets the tone: expectations of engagement, care for students, especially important during the pandemic, and enthusiasm for their subject. Trusting is the “influence” between teaching presence and social presence (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). With trust, students are more likely to venture out of their comfort zones, essential for arts-based embodied activities. As Devyn says, “drama pushes you out of your comfort zone; if everyone is doing it, I can do it too!”

Social Presence

All participants in the study shared experiences of connection and belonging. Emma comments, “you become really comfortable with each other. I’ve made some great friends that I am still in touch with today”. Rhys remarks that he didn’t expect the strong relationships formed to remain throughout the year. Vithu stresses that friendships formed between very diverse groups of people when “society tells us that they shouldn’t get along”. The capacity of the unit to disrupt perceived social structures is evident through this statement. He elaborates by explaining, “we had non-binary students in class. Explain it to us, discuss it, allow us to accept it”. Vicky insightfully acknowledges that “when everyone becomes a bit vulnerable, it creates an environment where people are more comfortable around each other”. Their ethnodrama explored social issues such as bullying, experienced by their group during school. Emma agreed that the play helped “appreciate our differences and our stories”. Most groups had a Facebook group to allow students to maintain relationships outside of class, which helped reduce isolation during lockdowns and provided support for assessments.

At the intersection of cognitive and social presence is the influence of meaning-making (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). Collaborative activities, independent of the tutor, provide opportunities for students to make meaning of their personal and shared experiences as they work towards a common goal. Online tools such as mind maps and shared documents are utilised to make meaning and develop higher order thinking (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Most participants indicated that collaborating over Zoom was challenging due to the diversity of people. Vicky and Emma were able to gently draw the quieter members out of their shell. Liam notes an element of frustration with less focused members of the class, who elevate relationships over getting high grades. Participants made meaning of their experiences collectively through the experience of creating and viewing the ethnodramas. Rhys remarks that “we would not be as close if we did not

do this together". Emma reminisces about the session where her class watched all the plays; an experience she will remember fondly for a long time.

Students wholeheartedly expressed the importance of the remote learning classes during COVID-19. For Vicky, "I was able to go to class and talk to people. I had social interaction". Rhys remarks that "we were all in lockdown, we could relate to that". He remembers the good times, "like laughing a lot, just with peers". Emma highlights agency in remote learning, when it is so easy to keep your camera off and disengage: the "connections with peers and your teacher makes you feel a bit more human during a crazy time". Finally, Devyn sums up belonging: "I didn't have to sit at home by myself. I could go to class. I had this sense of belonging, 'cause I belong to this diploma, I belong with these classmates".

Conclusion

Garrison (2016) attests that "education is a social enterprise dependent on creating a sense of purpose and belonging" (p. 16). Sense of belonging is beneficial for student engagement, deep learning, and retention, especially for students at risk of course completion (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Students in EDES begin their course uncertain of their capacity to be successful learners. Through engagement with arts-based activities and the support of their peers and tutors, they embody the concept that their actions can create the changes they want to see in the world, and in education specifically (McLaren, 2021). As teachers, our role is to provide them with the space to play, to question, and to take risks as they build their identity as learners and future teachers together. The intersection of the VU Block Model, remote teaching, and arts-based pedagogies offered specific challenges and specific opportunities.

The nature of this VU Block Model offers opportunities for students to develop friendships with relative ease, in the context of the classroom. The addition of arts-based pedagogy, which pushes students and teachers to take risks in their learning and acknowledge spaces of vulnerability for themselves and others, works well with the VU Block Model to support the development of friendships among peers and a sense of belonging in a group. In this course, students remain in the same group for all eight units, and these friendships have time to develop and be cemented in later units. Particularly notable from the participants in this study is their sense of surprise with making friends and their acknowledgement that many of their class friends were not people they would have befriended in other contexts.

Embedding arts-based pedagogy in remote teaching is challenging and requires commitment to the process by the teacher, and preparedness to take emotional and intellectual risks by the students. It is clear from the participants in this study that they had embraced the arts-based learning. Their engagement with this pedagogy was significant in creating shared experiences with peers. The motivation and goodwill of the students, the sense of solidarity within the group, the flexibility and adaptability of the teacher, and the focus on arts-based pedagogies all contributed to the creation of a safe space in which these students could experience belonging. The authors of this paper suggest that arts-based pedagogies create opportunities for students to connect. Such connection results in an emergent sense of belonging, even though the participants were in an unfamiliar intellectual environment, working remotely from their own homes in physical isolation from one another.

The intensity of the VU Block Model supports both connection and belonging. Like the rehearsal process for a play, the VU Block Model invites people to share feelings and viewpoints within a class “bubble”. Momentum gathers when students develop trust in one another and find a common goal in their learning through shared assessment tasks, stories of learning, and intellectual journeys. Perhaps distinctive to remote study was the preparedness of students to tolerate (and even in many cases to embrace) challenges. As the crisis of COVID-19 diminishes, it is important to foster that same tolerance in both in-person and remote delivery, as it was influential in creating a trusting learning environment.

As we move to a post-COVID-19 world, it is evident that higher education will be irreversibly changed (Gourlay, 2021). Just as the dichotomy of emotion/reason, mind/body, human/more-than-human, and art/science are being dismantled (Ellingson, 2017; Leavy, 2020; Wright, 2015), the distinction between in-person and online education is evaporating. Studies such as this help us envisage a possible future. In this study, we ponder how embodied arts-based pedagogy might enhance student belonging in VU Block Model and remote learning contexts, and explore the impact of tutor and peer relationships in the remote learning classroom. Overwhelmingly, participant narratives share experiences of connection through uncertainty. Vithu eloquently sums up the experience of arts-based embodied activities via Zoom in the midst of a pandemic: “We were thrown in the deep end, we had to bond, struggle and achieve together and know each other on a deeper level”. Although it is doubtful if technology can ever “fully compensate for face-to-face interactions” (Allen et al., 2021, p. 93), as Emma says, connection, laughter, and the arts help us feel “a bit more human”.

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Conflict of Interest

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