Introduction: Special Issue on Belonging

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This special issue considers uses of technology aimed at facilitating our students’ sense of belonging. As we received proposals and submissions for the issue, we found the very notion of “facilitating our students’ sense of belonging” proved to be a doorway to a rich context with a diversity of purposes for using technology and a multitude of tools. As our authors broke down the meaning of “sense of belonging,” they often identified that feelings such as respect, courage, and importance, were at play. They found that relatedness, thinking of oneself as a member of a group or community, matters.

“Relatedness” (Rock, 2008) is an aspect of a social neuroscience model (SCARF – status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness) that addresses rewards and threats that humans inherently feel and means that diverse perspectives must be supported. When students feel safe sharing their thoughts and ideas, they are in a reward-approach response space neurologically, and will continue to be curious, eager to learn, and open to brave space discussions. Triggering the “R” in SCARF has the potential to touch the other components of SCARF, further increasing the positive learning environment and belonging. From this model, we can see that when an environment does not contribute to rewarding our sense of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness students shut down (avoid interaction) because they feel threatened. We believe our authors identify methods that create a sense of belonging because they create moments when students feel socially rewarded for being in and contributing to the community.

“Intentionality” came up in many of the articles. The authors deconstruct courses and design with both belonging in mind and a commitment to purposefully make use of technology. Each author showed us spaces where designing with this intentionality created opportunity for students to matter, to interact, to best express their learning, to make meaning, and to identify with content, each other, and their instructor. While “match the tool to the purpose” may not be an unexpected takeaway, it is a powerful one. Another powerful takeaway stems from our authors’ combination of research on learning and teaching, the research on belonging, and the wide range of technology tools available to us: We suggest failure to consider belonging in teaching and learning, because it is critical for students’ wellbeing and mental health, is inexcusable in today’s environment. The first step toward addressing belonging is commitment to our own growth as instructors. Once we learn enough, whether about teaching practices, learning science, technology, or course design, then second, we can identify one opportunity in our classes to support belonging and design for it. Before long, with ongoing commitment to our growth and creating opportunities to foster belonging, our courses will more fully and inclusively support our students.

Flow of Articles Throughout the Issue

This issue begins with our Quick Hits because we want to introduce that the intersection of belonging and technology can be implemented into activities, rather than instructors being overwhelmed with attempting to design an entire course with intentional design toward belonging. Readers will learn
about three distinct technological integrations: Link to Life and Learning (L2LL), video-based discussion using the Flip platform, and the classic six-word memoir (SWM). While readers may be familiar with these activities or technologies, the uniqueness is their connection to belonging while learning with technology. Following the Quick Hits section, a critique offers suggestions of how using two common technologies, Facebook and makerspace, could be evaluated and enhanced to address belonging.

The focus of this issue then turns toward three reflective essays, offering an interrogation of course design through different lenses. The first considers a role for applying positive psychology, the scientific study of human and organizational flourishing and thriving, which underscores belonging as a basis for wellbeing. The second essay focuses on the importance of a throughline for belonging supported by technology that centers student voice and agency. The final reflective essay introduces a framework of course design for belonging and inclusion based on Schwab’s (1973) commonplaces of learning. These essays provide readers with theoretical frameworks for designing a course with intentional and purposeful use of technology to increase students’ sense of belonging to aid teaching and learning.

The final section of this issue presents four case studies. The first one has an emphasis on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and builds on the theme of course design from our reflective essays. The second case study connects readers back to specific technologies, like the Quick Hits and critique, where the authors examine the use of Facebook Live for faculty and student readings, online conferencing for an alumni career panel, and an online publication tool for a celebration of student writing. This online publication tool is also a prominent aspect of one of the reflective essays, so it is interesting to note its use in multiple submissions. The final two case studies are situated with an international student focus related to collaboration. We finish the issue with these two submissions to highlight a global lens to belonging, technology, teaching, and learning.

Concluding Remarks from Co-Editors

We hope this issue supports your efforts to make belonging a crucial element of your courses. While our authors approach designing for belonging in many ways, interactivity is one characteristic that fueled all approaches. That is not surprising. Through our own reliance on technology-supported interactivity in our daily communication, we know it can help our communities thrive when used well. In fact, this intertwining of interactivity and community also appeared repeatedly in the articles. Designing courses or parts of courses for interactive community engagement supported by technology can lead students to feel inspired, hopeful, open, inquisitive, and confident. We see students feel an increased sense of belonging and achieve meaningful outcomes in courses that create avenues for interactivity, especially as a community of learners. Student choice to support engagement also came up in many of the articles. In this vein, many of the articles explicitly focused on Universal Design for Learning or developing a Community of Inquiry to support developing a sense of belonging.

Finally, as we read through and discussed the articles for this issue, we kept circling back to the SCARF model as an applied entry into belonging in the classroom. Designing for belonging reaches both instructors’ and students’ innate reward-approach center in our brains. A literature review of this model suggests that it is used more in management, leadership, and coaching situations; however, it might serve as an avenue for future research related to belonging in the classroom. With an increased awareness from the field of social neuroscience, we reinforce intentional and purposeful use of technology for learning and course design. We create more meaningful spaces for our students to belong.
References