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‘It does not feel like I am a university student’: Considering the impact of online learning on students’ sense of belonging in a ‘post pandemic’ academic literacy module

Abstract

Belonging is important for student motivation, retention and engagement. However, belonging is difficult to foster in the online environment, and the pandemic necessitating a shift to online learning has meant that many senior students may not feel that they belong at university. Drawing on qualitative data obtained via two online questionnaires, this paper conceptualises the impact of online learning on students’ sense of belonging by focusing on the interconnected nature of spatial, academic and social belonging, which serves to foster an overall sense of personal belonging. The paper also considers what the role of academic literacy modules is in this situation, as they are uniquely situated to foster a sense of belonging in students. A model for conceptualising the interconnected nature of belonging is also presented.

Keywords: *academic belonging, academic literacy module, belonging, higher education, senior students, social belonging, spatial belonging.*

1. Introduction

[I]t does not really feel like I actually am a university student because there is no physical classes and no contact with my “new university friends”. That would have completed my adjustment. (Kat)

I know I am a university student but it does not feel that way. Most likely because I was not on campus yet, never had a chance to meet my lecturers or fellow colleagues. (Cloud)

Kat and Cloud were two of our first-year students in 2021. They were enrolled in a compulsory, semester-long academic literacy module, which we taught online. By this stage, we had learned from the previous year’s rapid adjustment to online teaching and learning (due to the

Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdown). As academic literacy practitioners, we felt that it was necessary to create a warm, welcoming, and responsive learning environment that would not only assist students with navigating and adjusting to the new university ways of being, doing, and knowing (as is standard to academic literacy modules) (Marshall *et al.*, 2012), but also to the new online teaching and learning context. Despite our best attempts, many of our students, like Kat and Cloud, still struggled to adjust to university and were left feeling like they did not belong.

As part of our ongoing attempts to improve our teaching and learning practices, we sent out an online questionnaire to our students at the end of each term, asking them about their experiences of online teaching and learning. The students were all from the same faculty and were all enrolled in our academic literacy module. The second questionnaire was a follow-up to the first one and was meant to track whether students' experiences had changed; both questionnaires had a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions. Qualitative data were collected from 64 students in the first term and 77 in the second term. Convenience sampling was used, though we were fortunate that many of the students who filled in the first questionnaire also completed the follow-up one. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university in question, and students were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could provide a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. In these questionnaires, many students, like Kat and Cloud, indicated that they felt as if they were not real university students; they felt disconnected from staff and peers; in essence, that they did not belong.

This conceptual paper is inspired by these responses and our own growing awareness, as academic literacy practitioners, of how the pandemic may have shaped and shifted our ideas of belonging. Unlike other studies which focus on determining and improving students' sense of belonging during the pandemic (see, for example, Edwards, Barthelemy & Frey, 2022; Procentese *et al.*, 2020; Scoulas, 2021; Tice *et al.*, 2021; Versteeg, Kappe & Knuiman, 2022), this paper considers belonging in a 'post-pandemic'¹ classroom, and specifically the academic literacy one. The focus has traditionally been on making concerted efforts at fostering belonging in first-year students (see for example Kahu, Ashley & Picton, 2022), with little attention being given to non-first year, or senior students (Miller, Williams & Silberstein, 2019). However, as we would like to argue, in terms of belonging, many of our senior² students will be in as much need of active initiatives to foster belonging as first-year students. The aim, therefore, of this paper is looking beyond the pandemic and considering what would be the best way to move forward by suggesting ways to mitigate feelings of not belonging and/or promoting a sense of belonging in students for academics (and specifically academic literacy practitioners) and university policy makers.

2. Belonging

The central theoretical concept that frames this paper is the idea of belonging. Traditionally a fairly nebulous and challenging concept to define, there has been a concerted attempt at concretising the concept of 'belonging'. For the purpose of this paper, we will be drawing on two definitions. The first, from Goodenow (1993: 80), which is generally used on studies on belonging (see for example Aelenei *et al.*, 2020; Ahn & Davis, 2020; Goodenow & Grady,

1 This should perhaps be 'post-lockdown' classroom, since the Covid-19 pandemic is still very much ongoing. However, practice wisdom (Bamber & Stefani, 2016) attests that many institutions have been referring to the 'post-pandemic' classroom and as such we will use this term.

2 'Senior' students in this case is meant to refer to students who are not in their first year, but who may be in second, third, or fourth year of their undergraduate degree.

1993; Lam *et al.*, 2015; Marshall *et al.*, 2012; Scoulas, 2021), defines belonging as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment”. This definition places the student at the centre of teaching and learning, but also emphasises the importance of others to foster this sense of belonging; that belonging is relational (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021). The second definition that we found useful in framing the paper is from Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2020: 377), who define belonging as

students' perception of feeling valued and respected by other students and feeling like a valued part of the university context. Students who feel a sense of belonging to university feel an affinity with their institution, feel that they fit in and are part of the community, and feel accepted and recognised for their abilities.

This definition emphasises the idea of students feeling that they are part of something greater than themselves, in this case higher education institutions and the broader academic community. As this definition highlights, students who belong feel “at home” at university (Van Herpen *et al.*, 2020: 864). A sense of belonging therefore helps students to feel that they are valid and valued members of an academic community. We would like to call this ‘personal belonging’ – the overall, fundamental sense of being part of the university environment and community (Horner, 2022). To that end, we would like to distinguish between three broad types of belonging, namely spatial, academic, and social. Spatial belonging is usually presented as a subset of academic belonging, but we would like to add it as its own type of belonging. The three types are discussed below in the order in which students may experience the university setting, namely physically being on campus and in classrooms (spatial belonging), engaging with teaching and learning practices (academic belonging), and interacting with others (social belonging).

Firstly, spatial belonging is related to the physical campus space where teaching takes place; that is, the formal spaces of university, such as the buildings and the classrooms (De Beer, Smith & Jansen, 2009; Kahu *et al.*, 2022; Loose & Vasquez-Echeverría, 2007), as well as the more informal spaces on campus, such as parking lots, cafes, benches, etc. (Horner, 2022), which are essential for simultaneously developing social belonging and spatial belonging (related to the formal spaces). Secondly, academic belonging refers to the extent to which students feel that they fit in academically at university. This fitting in could refer to their choice of degree; that is, whether they belong in the discipline they have chosen to study (Araujo *et al.*, 2014; Edwards *et al.*, 2022; Kahu *et al.*, 2022) and to their ability; that is, that they feel that they have the relevant academic competence, firstly, to be accepted into university and secondly, to succeed (Edwards *et al.*, 2022; Kahu *et al.*, 2022; Lewis & Hodges, 2015). Thirdly, social belonging refers to the extent to which students feel an affinity with other students or with staff, and the extent to which they feel part of the social communities within higher education (Kahu *et al.*, 2022; Marshall *et al.*, 2012; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019; Tice *et al.*, 2021). Students who share characteristics, backgrounds, and/or experiences are more likely to connect with one another (Edwards *et al.*, 2022; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021; Walton & Cohen, 2011), thereby enhancing a sense of ‘I belong’, because someone ‘like me’ is also at university. Staff, similarly, are important in helping students foster belonging and students may form deep connections with lecturers and tutors, which enable students to feel like they belong (Kahu *et al.*, 2022; Marshall *et al.*, 2012; Miller *et al.*, 2019; Tice *et al.*, 2021). Both opening responses allude to the different types of belonging. For example, Kat and Cloud reference that they have not been on campus; thus suggesting that they experience a lack of spatial

belonging. Both refer to not feeling like university students, which suggests that they do not feel as if they belong academically. Moreover, they also mention the lack of contact with their peers and staff, which alludes to a lack of social belonging.

These three types of belonging are important for students to help foster an overall sense of personal belonging; that is, the general sense of 'I belong at university'. Although they are often presented as independent of one another, the types of belonging are interconnected and feed into one another: students who have a strong sense of social belonging may be more comfortable navigating the university space (with or without their friends) and participating in class (thereby increasing academic belonging) (Kahu *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, students who feel that they belong academically may be more comfortable making friends and finding their way across campus.

For first-year students, developing a sense of belonging spatially, academically and socially is especially important, as the transition to higher education can be quite challenging for many students who leave the safety and familiarity of high school behind (Araujo *et al.*, 2014). Academic literacy modules are uniquely positioned to foster the development of belonging. Academic literacy modules can assist with academic belonging, because the aim of such modules is to make the "institutional practices of mystery" (Lillis, 2001: 76) more accessible, the ways of knowing, being and doing that are central to higher education, which should enable them to feel more at home at university, thereby enabling academic belonging (Marshall *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the academic literacy module's classroom provides a safe, nurturing space (Pym, Goodman & Patsika, 2011) in which students can connect with their peers and with staff, thereby forging interpersonal connections, finding commonalities and furthering collegiality, which aid in fostering social belonging. At the same time, academic literacy modules can enable spatial belonging by encouraging and developing academic belonging and social belonging, thereby enhancing students' comfortableness with the university space.

However, the pandemic-necessitated shift to online learning had a negative impact on many students' ability to foster a sense of belonging in the higher education environment (Tice *et al.*, 2021). Even before the pandemic, belonging in an online context was found to be challenging (Thomas, Herbert & Teras, 2014), with staff and students having to make a much more conscious effort to foster a sense of belonging to one another and their institutions than would have been needed in a more face-to-face context. If belonging is relational (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021), but students are cut off from that to which they have to relate – their peers, the staff, even the campus space – in the online context, where they often have to work in isolation at home, with unfamiliar people online (Procentese *et al.*, 2020), it is understandable that belonging is difficult to foster in the online context. Despite all the efforts made globally throughout lockdown to ensure that students would still feel part of university, that they would still have a university experience (even if muted), many students struggled to feel a sense of belonging to the university during the pandemic (Procentese *et al.*, 2020; Scoulas, 2021; Tice *et al.*, 2021).

Our students alluded to these challenges and below we include three main themes that emerged from their responses, namely spatial belonging, academic belonging related to ability, and social belonging related to people; that is, staff and peers. Although we discuss these themes individually, there is quite a bit of overlap and interconnectedness (as we will consider later).

3. Theme 1: Spatial belonging related to campus

Quite a few students in our questionnaire pointed to a lack of connection with the physical space of campus and how that impacted the way they viewed themselves and their sense of belonging to university.

It can be difficult to say that you are a proper university student if you do not have the campus experience. (Reign)

It doesn't feel like I'm a student because the experience at home and on campus is not the same. (Olympia)

I do not feel that I am a student of University as I did not enter the Lecture rooms of the University. I believe that in online teaching, it is so easy to just not attend the class and in face to face learning I will get the motivation of going to school and attending classes real. (Ngalo)

The campus space can be seen in two ways. Firstly, there is the physical campus space, referring to the buildings and classrooms. Secondly, there is the informal campus space which "support[s] students' material needs and services and ... where students gather at will" (Horner, 2022: 110). These include areas such as cafes, residences, sportsgrounds, parking areas and student centres, which contribute to the overall student experience. Research has shown (Kahu *et al.*, 2021) that familiarity with the physical campus space is crucial for developing a sense of belonging (especially during the first few weeks of class). For most students during the pandemic, the campus was an inaccessible space. Not being able to be present on campus would have impacted negatively on their sense of belonging to that space. Being able to interact with the physical spaces and resources of university (such as the library) means that students may be more likely to feel like they belong than those who only engage with online resources, people, and spaces (Scoulas, 2021).

Similarly, the absence of the informal spaces – as can be seen in Reign's comment about not having 'the campus experience' – has been just as instrumental in affecting students' sense of belonging. Often, the informal spaces on campus – the spaces between classrooms (Horner, 2022) – may be more conducive to fostering spatial belonging, especially if the classroom environment appears imposing and unwelcoming. The online environment would have affected this negatively. Although it could be argued that the online environment has its own informal spaces such as chatrooms, WhatsApp groups, or Zoom breakaway rooms, students are still isolated from one another and not physically present on campus, thereby influencing and exacerbating the lack of spatial belonging.

The seemingly natural solution to this would be that once students return to campus and have access to the buildings, the classrooms, the informal spaces, and be able to have 'university experiences', then they will feel that they belong. However, the campus space is still very unfamiliar to students. Our 2021 first-year students are now third-year students; and the 2022 students second year. Many second- and third-year students may be as unfamiliar with the campus space as the 2023 first-year cohort. Moreover, the campus space brings with it new worries which students did not have to contend with during lockdown. Informal conversations with senior students have shown that they are very worried that they will not have enough time between classes to move from one venue to the next, that they will not know how to find classrooms, that they do not know what to do in and bring to the classroom; these tend to be the concerns of first-year students. At the moment, the campus space is unfamiliar terrain that needs to be explored and mapped out by students.

One of the most important things we as educators can do is not to assume that students will automatically feel that they belong simply because they are physically on campus. For most of our students, the campus may still be a big, scary place. During the first-year orientation, emphasis is placed on showing students where certain buildings are. This should be extended to all students across the university, especially since many of our 'senior' students are in effect first-year students when it comes to navigating the campus space. There should be clear(er) signage at all buildings. Moreover, as academic literacy practitioners we could help students to navigate the specific ways in which the university's layout is signposted. On a practical level, we could also create maps to our venues, and we could offer to help students to their next venues. Most importantly, we need to be more aware of how lost our students may be (both figuratively and literally) when they return to campus.

4. Theme 2: Academic belonging related to ability

Some of the students indicated in the questionnaire that the online environment made them doubt their own legitimacy as university students, because it made them doubt their ability. For example,

I'm still struggling with everything, sometimes I feel like just quitting and mostly I feel like I'm just dumb or stupid. (Snamile)

Online teaching means doing everything by yourself. Yes, university is no child's play; however, online teaching makes it seem as [if] we as students come with resources from high school and just magically we're comfortable with the procedures. Deadlines are demanding, which I understand. We are preparing for the grown world but we come from a nurturing institution to being homeless. (Ocean)

I feel lost as if I just can't find my feet. It is very overwhelming because everyone expects that we must get a hand on this in a few weeks as if they were not a first-year student. (Lubambo)

For many of the students, the online environment seems to have made them question their own ability, which in turn would affect their sense of belonging. Academic belonging related to ability is quite important. If a student feels that he or she is academically capable enough to be at university, and that they have chosen the correct discipline, then they are more likely to feel that they belong (Kahu *et al.*, 2022). This, in turn, would encourage them to be interested in the course, to participate, and to do well (Kahu *et al.*, 2022). We can also see the interconnectedness between spatial belonging and academic belonging. Snamile's response, for example, shows a student who feels academically inadequate and who wants to discontinue her studies. It is possible that these feelings are exacerbated by her isolation from the campus space (both physical and informal), as well as from the people on campus (social belonging, discussed in the next section).

Academic literacy modules are uniquely situated to help students develop a better sense of academic belonging related to ability by enabling access to the inner workings of university. Academic literacy modules are able to make the ways of knowing, being and doing more accessible to students (Lillis, 2001). This should be the same in an online context. However, as the students have indicated, they still struggled with university work and workload, and doubted their ability. This no doubt is also tied up with a lack of social belonging and a lack of familiarity with the university space. Therefore, in the 'post-pandemic' classroom, we could consider how best to navigate students' doubt about themselves and their ability. This does,

however, become slightly challenging in contexts where students only have an academic literacy module in their first year of undergraduate studies, as is the case in our context. Second-year students at our institution will therefore not necessarily be able to rely on the academic literacy module to enable the development of that kind of academic belonging. This points to the importance of our paper in highlighting the issues that students may experience to create awareness for academics and opening up conversations around issues of academic belonging and how we, as academic literacy practitioners, can assist them.

5. Theme 3: Social belonging related to staff and peers

Quite a few students indicated that they felt isolated and alienated from their peers and from staff in the online learning environment:

The lack of interactions with people [impacts learning], as I think this inspires a thought of loneliness which can have its negative effects on learning. (Tammy)

The lack of motivation, as I believe it is crucial to have people around you to support and motivate you, and be with you. We chat on social platforms; however, this is not the same as in-person interactions. It can be somewhat lonely. (Ferdie)

... because we are not able to physically interact with one other which can be hard to others who are shy and are unable to share with their peers [why online teaching and learning environment is not effective for learning]. (Marina)

At the moment I am still scared because I am alone in this situation. Even though there are tutors and lecturer you can talk to, you are still a bit hesitant because I never met them in person. Only virtual which does not really encourage you to trust them. I personally feel like I would only be comfortable if I met in person... (Cloud 9).

Establishing a connection with staff and peers is important for establishing a sense of belonging (Kahu *et al.*, 2022). For many students, connecting with their peers is important for creating support systems, finding like-minded people, and establishing relationships (Marshall *et al.*, 2012). For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, connecting with students 'like them' also helps to affirm that they do belong at university (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019). Academic literacy modules have been found to be especially important for establishing connections with their peers, as tutorial groups (in particular) are instrumental in facilitating the kind of supportive and safe learning environments that make students comfortable with one another (Marshall, *et al.*, 2012; Pym *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, staff play an important role in assisting with social belonging, as they can provide support, encourage participation and assist students with adjusting to university (Miller *et al.* 2019; Tice *et al.*, 2021; Won, Hensley & Wolters, 2021). Staff in academic literacy modules are especially central to such processes due to the nature of the module and the classroom and students often form particularly strong attachments to their academic literacy lecturers and tutors.

However, the online environment made this challenging and many students indicated that they did not feel connected to their peers and staff. This would have increased their sense of not belonging at university. Although the online environment provides students with many ways of connecting with their peers or with staff, such as chatrooms, e-mail, or synchronous classes, there is still a barrier between the student and the other person – there is a lack of immediacy in the connection. In the same way that a return to the physical campus space does not necessarily ensure spatial belonging, so too a return to the classroom does not

necessarily ensure social belonging. Many senior students have not had the opportunity to practise their interpersonal skills during the pandemic, and informal conversations with our students in the classroom have shown an increase of students who call themselves introverts, compared to pre-pandemic classroom conversations. Consequently, being with other students, who are essentially strangers, in a classroom may be as anxiety-inducing, awkward and alarming for senior students as it is for first-years (Marshall *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the lack of familiarity with the physical and informal campus spaces could mean that students are not as comfortable with utilising those spaces for social purposes. As academic literacy practitioners, we could work with academics and management to help design safe, supportive classroom experiences that could ease senior students into social belonging.

6. The belonging model

Drawing from the responses of the questionnaires, as well as from researchers such as Nunn (2021), Horner (2022), and Ahn and Davis (2020) who identified different types of belonging, we have developed the following interconnected model for envisioning belonging:

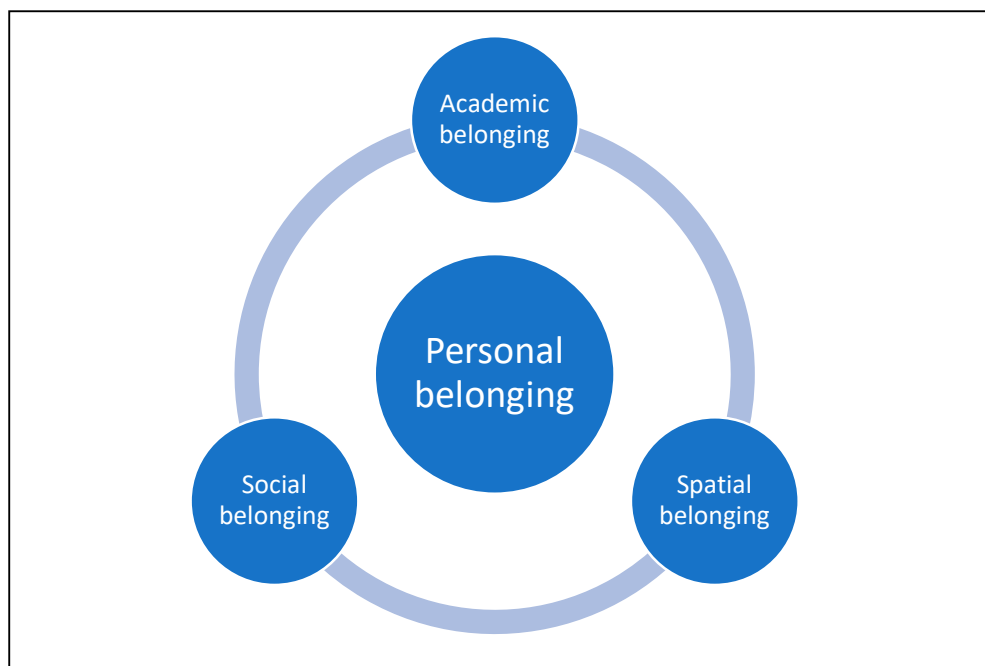


Figure 1: *Interconnected belonging model*

The model highlights the interconnected nature of spatial, academic, and social belonging and how these contribute to the overall, overarching sense of personal belonging. The visual nature of the model makes it a useful tool for conceptualising belonging in different university contexts and could be used to assist with determining where the gaps are in developing students’ sense of belonging. Significantly, this model positions the personal belonging at the centre, as often there is a focus on the different types with personal belonging being side-lined, or left implicit (Ahn & Davis, 2020). The model can be seen, therefore, as a living one, where the various types of belonging can be moved (or ‘spun’, given its circular nature)

around to place emphasis on the one that needs the most attention. For example, in its current iteration, academic belonging is placed at the top, thereby suggesting a greater emphasis on developing academic belonging, but it could be moved so that social belonging is at the top to focus on developing that aspect more. This model also helps to emphasise that all three types contribute to the overall sense of personal belonging, and that should one type be lacking in some way, it can be focused on more explicitly.

7. Why is belonging important for university students?

So far in this paper, we have discussed the different types of belonging and how the pandemic impacted students' sense of belonging beyond their first year negatively, and we have presented a model for conceptualising belonging. But why is it so important to develop a sense of belonging for students? Drawing on Kahu *et al.* (2022), belonging is important behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively for students.

Behaviourally, a sense of belonging leads to greater engagement, participation and performance in students. Students who feel that they belong are more likely to engage and participate in class discussions (Aelenei *et al.*, 2020; Goodenow & Grady 1993; Kahu *et al.* 2022). Relatedly, a sense of belonging may lead to improved grade performance (De Beer *et al.*, 2009; Korpershoek *et al.*, 2020; Lam *et al.*, 2015). Students with a healthy sense of belonging will therefore behave in a manner that is appropriate for a university student. Similarly, at a cognitive level, students who feel that they belong will be more cognitively engaged in their studies, leading to students who are better able to adapt to the challenges and demands of university (Abdollahi *et al.*, 2019). For example, students who feel that they belong are more likely to enjoy learning and to find learning easier, as well as being active, self-regulated learners (Kahu *et al.*, 2019). Lastly, belonging is important emotionally, as it provides students with the necessary emotional fortitude to remain motivated in their studies and to continue with their studies. Students who feel that they belong at university are more motivated (Abdollahi *et al.*, 2019; Aelenei *et al.*, 2020; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) and are therefore less likely to drop out (Korpershoek *et al.*, 2020; Scoulas 2021). As Scoulas (2021: 2) argues, "students who have a sense of belonging are likely to remain in university, because they feel accepted and valued by their peers and universities, whereas students who lack a sense of belonging are likely to experience loneliness and depression". Belonging is therefore critical to students finding their place at university, in assisting them with connecting with others, and in making them feel like they are part of a larger whole.

8. Conclusion

In drawing on students' responses to our questionnaires, this paper has considered how belonging has been impacted by the pandemic and the necessitated shift to online learning. Significantly, it considers what the implications of this would be for senior students. Senior students; that is, students who are not in their first year, are traditionally not as actively focused on when considering belonging initiatives (Kahu *et al.*, 2022), as it may be assumed that having gone through these in their first year, they would already have a sense of belonging. Yet, the absence from the physical campus space, the academic challenges that accompany online teaching and learning, as well as the lack of interaction with their peers and students, may have caused senior students to struggle with their own sense of belonging.

Academic literacy practitioners in particular are uniquely situated to enable the development of belonging in students. Yet, many academic literacy modules may only be presented in the first year. Despite this, academic literacy practitioners may work with academics and management to suggest ways of enabling the development of belonging in senior students, so as to create a learning environment that students find motivating and engaging, that will lead to better grade performance and greater enjoyment of learning, and which in turn will aid in retention (Scoulas, 2021). To assist with this, we have developed the belonging model, which highlights the interconnected nature of different types of belonging (spatial, academic, and social) and how this contributes to an overall sense of personal belonging. This 'living model' could be used to open discussions and initiatives around developing belonging initiatives for students by academic literacy practitioners and other stakeholders.

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