

ual:

the
exchange

Fostering belonging and compassionate pedagogy





About this strand

In this strand we explore how belonging relates to learning, teaching and student success. We examine how it can be fostered through our teaching practice and look at compassionate pedagogy as a key approach. We acknowledge the complexity and contextual nature of the phenomenon of belonging, by connecting to a wide range of conceptual ideas within relational and psycho-social dimensions of teaching.

There is no ‘one-size fits all’ intervention to create a sense of belonging, but through this strand, we will support you to design approaches for your own students within your discipline context.

Our aims are that you will:

- Explore contemporary thinking around student belonging and how this relates to your personal and collective contexts.
- Identify potential barriers in a students’ sense of belonging and success.
- Develop teaching and learning strategies and compassionate pedagogies that nurture student belonging.

This strand is particularly helpful for courses when:

- Unit feedback, course committees, NSS and USS free-text comments refer to issues related to relationships, isolation and loneliness, community, racism, bias.
- Retention rates are below 80%.
- There are patterns of non-attendance.
- There are awarding differentials.
- NSS and USS learning community question scores are below 70% satisfaction.

How will we engage?

Our work together will be action orientated and experientially driven; drawing on student voices and your own experiences. You will engage in individual reflective activities and team-based discursive sessions. With your Course Leader you will build on these conversations and implement identified actions for your enhancement plan. Multi-media resources and practical tools will be curated online to support you.

The strand adopts a blended teaching approach. Most sessions and activities run online through a mix of asynchronous and synchronous modes. There will be opportunities to share learnings and practices with other courses across UAL.





Why belonging and why now?

Sense of belonging became a prominent topic in the UK Higher Education sector after the publication of Liz Thomas' (2012) HEFCE funded 'What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme' report. This highlighted that feelings of isolation and not 'fitting in' were the most common reasons for UK students considering withdrawal. Creating a culture of belonging has since become a priority for increasing student attainment, retention and engagement. It is considered one of the most important needs of students in their learning.

The dominant culture sends signals to students about who is valued – and if a student does not feel valued, they are much less likely to succeed (NUS, 2011:6)

Student belonging is increasingly used to understand and address awarding differentials between Black, Asian and minority ethnic* students and White students. Whilst a sense of belonging is needed by all, it is experienced unequally. Research has found a sense of belonging to be a significant concern for minority and marginalised student groups because they experience overt and subtle exclusion. Anna Mountford-Zimdars and colleagues in their HEFCE report (2015), *Causes of differences in student outcomes*, identified relationships between staff and students alongside psycho-social identity factors as a key determinant.

4 in 10 University students lack a sense of belonging to their institution (WONKHE, 2019)

*We recognise that the term 'BAME' homogenises the experiences of global majority peoples and use this here in context of HE data on attainment.



What do we mean by belonging and compassionate pedagogy?

This strand views the phenomenon of belonging as a basic human need rooted in feelings (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). There is no agreed definition in literature, but we consider it as students' feelings of being valued, respected, supported, included, and that they matter by teachers and peers, so that they feel part of the university learning community. When it is present, motivation to learn and resilience to tackle challenges are higher. When it is lacking, students report greater anxiety and boredom, alongside feelings of being alienated and disenfranchised. Hindering their personal growth and creative thinking.

This affective concept is rooted in human connection - it is social and relational. Through our interactions with others we feel (or don't feel) we belong. Whilst belonging is often associated with perceptions of congruence or cohesion within a group, this isn't about 'fitting in' or assimilating, rather about feeling welcomed for who you are by tutors, peers, course culture and institutions.

As belonging is affective, it is unstable; continually being contested and negotiated. It can be lost or found at any point in a students' learning journey. During moments of vulnerability and change it takes on heightened importance and is at greater risk. As educators, we have the agency to influence this construct throughout students' studies by maintaining a positive and supportive emotional learning climate. We can signal to students that they matter.

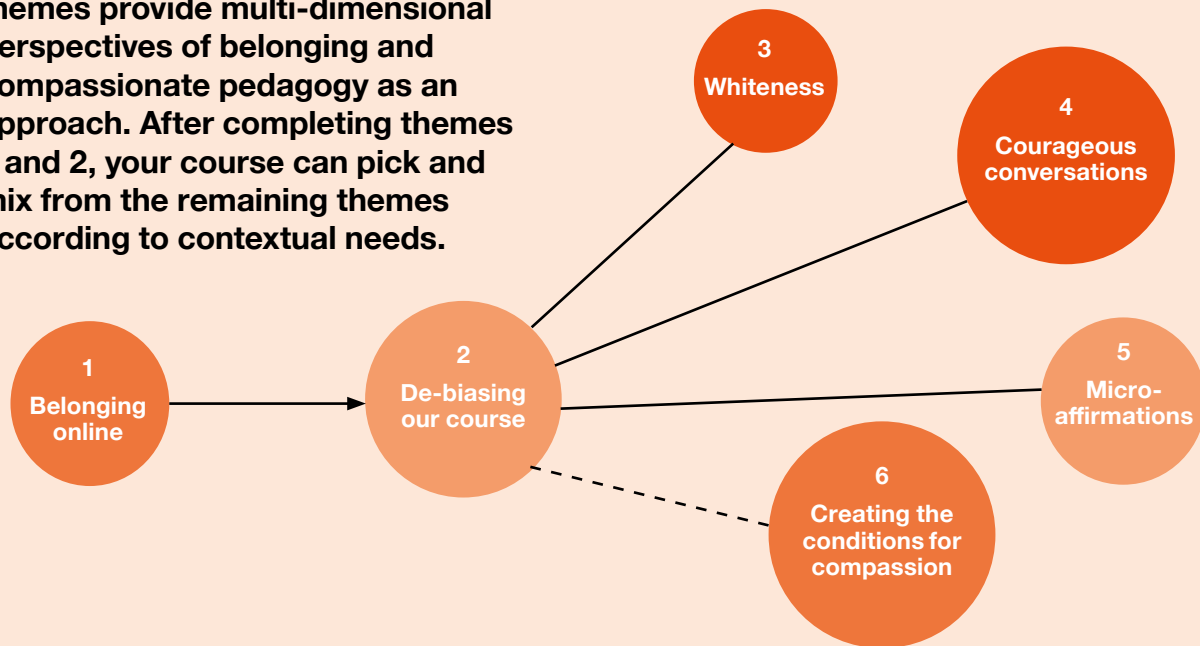
Compassionate pedagogy encourages educators to foster belonging by creating conditions that acknowledge structural oppression and reduce their impact on our students. The philosophical definitions of compassionate pedagogy combine diverse historical and cultural perspectives that offer a lens to reflect on how we learn, teach and build social relations. We take Paul Gilbert's (2005) definition of compassion as the 'noticing of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to take action to reduce it'. Compassionate pedagogy concerns judgement and action that focuses on transformation.

Damaging psychological effects can arise from stereotyping, particularly the negative effects on students' self-confidence if HE staff or peers project bias, either consciously or unconsciously

(Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015: iii)

The package

A series of six interconnected themes provide multi-dimensional perspectives of belonging and compassionate pedagogy as an approach. After completing themes 1 and 2, your course can pick and mix from the remaining themes according to contextual needs.



Theme 1 Belonging online (compulsory)

→ Introduces the topic of fostering belonging and key influences. Examines how we might nurture a sense of belonging in an online learning environment. Whilst belonging is considered through an online lens, the concepts and strategies are equally applicable to face to face teaching.

Theme 2 De-biasing our course (compulsory)

→ Explores how students experience bias whilst studying at UAL, and opens up a discussion to consider implications from both individual and structural perspectives. We examine de-biasing strategies to support the development of compassionate pedagogy and reflective teaching practice.

Theme 3 Whiteness

→ Explores whiteness as racial formation (social construction), to challenge the social, economic and affective relations that impact on students' sense of belonging. We look at how privilege and power combine to enact inequitable interactions in our learning contexts.

Theme 4 Courageous conversations

→ Looks at orbital conversations around anti-racist practice and the intersections of race with other 'protected characteristics'. By making mistakes, asking awkward questions, actively listening and being prepared to be uncomfortable in a safe setting, we can make confident incremental change to teaching and learning.

Theme 5 Micro-affirmations

→ Examines Mary Rowe's (2008) concept of micro-affirmations - small acts of recognition and acceptance - as a strategy to build meaningful relationships between staff and students. We consider how positive and affirmative interactions influence initial sense of belonging, and how micro-aggressions hinder it.

Theme 6 Creating the conditions for compassion

→ Investigates how to engender a culture of compassion through leadership by developing self-awareness and applying theoretical insights and strategies. We discuss approaches to shifting changes in organisational and individual cultures and behaviours (Waddington, 2017). N.B. This is designed for Programme Directors and Associate Deans.



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Academic Enhancement Model and Attainment team

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