

Blending belonging: Using an e-portfolio as a locus for the convergence of the foundations of belonging in tertiary education

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ABSTRACT

The disruption caused by the Covid pandemic to expectations of and assumptions surrounding already disputed concepts, such as engagement and participation within the student journey throughout tertiary education, remains *wicked* in its unruliness. As such, our ability as practitioners to anticipate and manage students' (and our own) expectations in both physical and virtual learning spaces is dynamic and fragile. However, the in-between space created by the tension of the desire to nurture a *new normal* and avoid *The Snapback* (Bryant, 2021), gives rise not only to uncertainty, but scope to innovate for enhancement.

This case study will share reflections on using an e-portfolio assessment to address and consolidate the mooted four foundations of belonging in HE (Blake et al., 2022); connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy. The paper will consider the implications of facilitating and promoting these dimensions in the context of supporting an ever-more heterogeneous student population within tertiary education, for whom recent experiences of formal, post-compulsory education may have been disjointed or interrupted. The e-portfolio (using Pebblepad) supports engagement within the case study university's embedded Academic, Professional and Personal Development curriculum framework, which has been designed to support learners with diverse and rich prior experiences of learning and, using an academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006) based ethos, facilitate the extrapolation of existing competences and confidence to the academic domain.

Keywords: belonging, curriculum framework, APPD, blended learning, e-portfolio assessment

Introduction

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Tertiary Quality Focus Project is a clear meeting point for shaping current and future engagement with the concept of what tertiary has meant within the education sector and how negotiated priorities will inform its future. This emphasis on enhanced links and coherence between different tertiary contexts (SFC, 2024), of course, takes place in a still uncertain, supposedly post-pandemic context, where institutions continue to keenly feel the glow of the half-life of the actions, reactions, adjustments and agility required to navigate the move to emergency remote delivery and beyond. Whilst mindful of resisting *The Snapback* (Bryant, 2021), or any form of unquestioned return to pre-pandemic design and delivery entirely, we, as practitioners, and our students, now currently find ourselves navigating and interpreting mutable expectations and boundaries within a gradually changing balance in moving from blended hybridity to a return to prioritising face-to-face delivery. Whilst the narrative around the return to in-person attendance/ engagement is compelling from a perceived impact and positive experiential view (Student Futures Commission, 2021; Advance HE, 2023) perhaps what has not been as strongly

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foregrounded is the continued relevance of and, indeed, need for a continuation of blended and asynchronous engagement, that upholds the inclusive, flexible and sustainable tenets that emerged from creative responses. These responses provided efficient and engaging learning experiences during a period of our own guided learning and calculated professional risks, intended to find accommodating and engaging solutions as opposed to endorsing potentially hazardous experimentation that other and subjectify both the process and the student (Williamson et al., 2020).

This case study considers, in the context of those mutable delivery and engagement expectations, as well as interrupted learner identities and journeys, how using an academic, personal and professional development (APPD) framework that runs in parallel and in complement to disciplinary curricula, might mindfully promote active, blended dialogue on preserving sustainable practices to support student belonging. In particular, the case study will discuss the use of an e-portfolio assessment to encourage students to engage in reflective meaning-making which contributes to a sense of integrated and situated learning in support of a scaffolded, whole-of-institution approach (Kift, 2005; MacIntosh et al., 2022) to guiding the first year of study at university. Discussion will consider how the assessment encourages students to articulate motivations, values and goals and engage in acknowledging achievement as a form of active identity enactment and academic agency. The authors intend discussion to open conversation with colleagues through sharing their own practice observations and mooting scope for gentle suggestion of relevance in other learning contexts.

Belonging and mattering

The recent and significant sector-wide focus on belonging has acted as a bridge to allowing practitioners to examine the impact of interrupted student attendance (both virtual and physical) on the persistence of institutional community and consider ways in which articulations of belonging might influence student retention, satisfaction, and overall wellbeing (Allen et al., 2021). The notion of belonging in higher education is, of course, not a new concept, having been a pervasive theme in retention and persistence studies as well as those looking at transition and participation (Thomas, 2012; Masika & Jones, 2016; MacFarlane, 2018; Meehan & Howells, 2019; Ahn & Davis, 2020). In viewing how belonging might play a part in providing clarity, opportunity and flexibility as we navigate the evolving balance of return-to-campus activities with ongoing blended delivery, concepts of ownership, affiliation, identity and community might usefully influence the establishment of aims for what might be achieved. This speaks to Graham and Moir's (2022) caution that an authentic, student-driven approach to belonging is vital for students to encourage transformational possibilities as well as adjustments/ challenges or growth in a relational worldview, that privileges negotiation of studentship and selfhood, as opposed to endorsing a construction of belonging driven by students being shaped to fit in with an existing and perpetuated institutional culture and structure.

An associated area of discussion that has recently been emerging is that of students 'mattering' (Cole et al., 2020; Flett, 2022), looking more closely to identify and nurture the ways in which students use their positionality to build self-efficacy and recognition of their contribution to the institutional community. Hallam (2023) suggests that this sense of significance experienced by a student, partially achieved through attentive and focused interactions with staff, has the potential to be a less subjective aspect of their educational experience, and that these tangible experiences of mattering play a role in connecting and keeping students.

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Blake et al.'s (2022) *Building Belonging in Higher Education* posits four foundations of belonging based on a sector wide research project. The foundations - connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy – offer a basic yet integrated conceptual basis within which to locate discussion and review of practices that have been developed in support of encouraging students to develop a sense of intended and pervasive studentship specific to their institution of study. The four dimensions are co-dependent and inter-related, providing a basis on which to frame not just institutional responsibility regarding provision, but a way of articulating the principles that underpin a supported student experience. The research outlines the importance of taking a student-focused and centred approach to offering a breadth and variety of engagement options, through, for example, facilitating online social spaces (for group work, community), acknowledging the importance of differentiating between access to and accessibility of learning and teaching, and supporting an imperative to reject the perpetuation of a deficit support model in favour of an integrated institutional approach, to contest perpetuated feelings of 'otherness' by those students accessing support. The research also surfaced barriers to developing belonging, including "blurring the lines between the course and 'everything else'" (p.7), or a lack of integration of experiences, the impact of student mental health and cultural and systemic challenges. Indeed, the current complex and multiple influences on the student experience (increase in paid work, caring responsibilities, financial impact of cost of living on e.g. transport) permeate each of these possible types of barrier at a time when students' practical ability to engage in learning has never been more compromised.

Integrating and embedding academic, professional and personal development (APPD)

Due consideration to a now typically disrupted learner journey and associated diversity in students' academic, digital and information confidence and competence is a key area of interest for HEIs in designing and refining holistic student support. Interruptions within an already potentially non-linear route to study through tertiary education mean that there is a more important than ever mandate for a community of practice that considers clearly mapping, articulating and supporting extra-curricular attributes that students should develop. Principles such as reflection, applied experiential learning and synoptic assessment can help to engage learners in the types of dialogic active pedagogies that Graham (2022) argues can help to re-engage learners in agentic ways of 'being, becoming, belonging' (Kidd, 1973; Blaikie, 2020).

A curriculum framework which gives students the opportunity to engage in structured academic, professional and personal development (APPD) is one way in which these aspirations for a 'whole-of-institution' approach might be articulated. A curricular approach, with blended, self-directed and face-to-face components, intends to create a supportive, dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2018; 2020) and learning space that can "stimulate thinking, advance understanding, expand ideas and evaluate arguments, empowering (learners) for lifelong learning and democratic engagement. Being collaborative and supportive, it confers social and emotional benefits too" (Alexander, 2020, p.1). Such a curriculum aims to offer contextualised and situated opportunities to develop academic literacies (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 2006) in support of encouraging students to practice and refine learning approaches and techniques in an integrated way that reinforces the rationale and purpose of, for example, criticality or evidence-based writing. Furthermore, students are encouraged to make active links with their professional contexts and literacies, and apply APPD concepts and practices to their discipline-specific knowledge. For example, students might use their subject knowledge to develop a solutions-focused project aligned with one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, explore specific attributes required for an allied career path or to engage in ways of enhanced self-awareness to identify priority areas for focus. This intends to link

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broader areas of competence to the values and priorities of subject areas to highlight the importance of often implicitly observed attributes or behaviours around collaboration, autonomy or tolerance.

Case study institution context

The University of The West of Scotland (UWS), like many post-92 HEIs, has a diverse student population, and strong articulation links with partner colleges. Extensive acknowledgement of the importance of extended, longitudinal support for students transitioning from further education settings is embedded within a number of university initiatives and programmes (for example, the UWS Foundation Academy and College and Widening Participation liaison team). This is part of a wider, long-standing institutional endeavour to recognise and embrace the strengths of our diverse studentship and to provide clear and accessible, scaffolded support to not only develop confidence in learning literacies but to contribute to our institutional community.

ASPIRE

Entering university marks a substantial commitment and journey, potentially evoking both learner excitement and apprehension (Burns et al., 2020). Fluctuating mental health, anxiety regarding the climate crisis and cost of living difficulties are examples of some of the many wider, societal influences that affect student engagement, attendance and persistence (Kishi et al., 2023). UWS aims to support students to manage their responses to these influences in integrated and developmental ways, in the context of developing a breadth of student competences, confidence and resilience. The ASPIRE module was introduced in the academic year 22/23 into over 20 undergraduate programmes to begin to articulate some of these challenges with students, and to support the negotiation of responses through an integrated APPD curriculum. Students attend weekly, timetabled, in-person classes in their programme cohorts of typically no more than 25 students, to allow for discursive and student-led learning. This learning is supported by asynchronous content on the VLE and individual personal tutoring sessions aligned with the APPD curriculum. The 20 credit module runs over two terms to contribute to a long-thin, sustained support approach over the course of the academic year, and is intended to lead and develop learners as they transition into, through and beyond university life, in engaging learners in critical dialogue on, for example, social responsibility and citizenship. As practitioners negotiate the return to more face to face delivery, institutions are encouraged to take forward the flexible and inclusive gains made in developing creative responses to remote emergency learning and teaching, in providing continued and engaging blended learning for students (Banihashem et al., 2023; Sharma & Shree, 2023; Fang et al., 2023; Munir, 2022). ASPIRE provides a blended experience that delivers integrated and interoperable learning themes through dialogic, participative teaching methods and supporting asynchronous digital content. The module design promotes choice and customisation for students in selection and co-creation of learning (Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten, 2011; Bovill, 2020) by inciting confidence to guide activity pathways in-class, steer and influence content and customize weekly learning themes. In-class themes and asynchronous content also signpost students to appropriate employability, wellbeing or other forms of support within the wider university. Opportunities for individual, student-led conversations speak to the inclusion of an advising curriculum of personalised support that is a longitudinal and distinct feature of the module design.

The ethos of the model is underpinned by transition pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010; Nelson, Creagh, Kift, & Clarke, 2014) and academic literacies in providing continuity of support to allow learners to navigate the

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thresholds of cumulative experiential aspects of their journey (Vo et al., 2020). The learning themes identified and articulated within the core APPD framework are contextualised by subject for delivery, in the interests of adhering to an integrated, meaningful and situated interpretation of academic literacies principles (Lea, 1998; Wingate, 2012; Clarence & McKenna, 2017). Participation in ASPIRE sessions provides opportunities for students to actively explore aspects of their preferences, mutable/ multiple identities and values in broadening self-awareness and is consciously an active endeavour based on individuality and collaboration that asks students to reflect, articulate and participate in complement to learning scenarios where there is more of an information delivery priority. This protected yet experimental space (Boyd, Wilson & Smith, 2023) allows students to engage with concepts such as academic writing, digital confidence, academic integrity and citizenship and aims to align these with professional literacies (Canton et al., 2018) that encourage students to think about their longer-term, vocational application. Whilst students are required to meet the module learning outcomes through completion of the summative assessment, scope for students' individual and communal experiential learning through rhizomatic discussion routes (Cormier, 2008; Ellis, 2016) contributes to a multi-layered experience that offers opportunity for targeted discussion as well as more relational topics (such as support for assessment planning, use of evidence in writing or more identity-focussed discussion on community engagement and participation). The module is collaboratively delivered by the centralised APPD team in partnership with programme staff in each of the four academic schools.

Principles of reflection are embedded within the ASPIRE curriculum through structured practices, such as (optional) weekly written observations, in-class activities and aims, as well as in the nature of a summative reflective essay. Whilst reflective practice may be a more familiar concept to learners on programmes where this is an embedded professional practice principle (such as Paramedic Science), comfort in navigating the process cannot be nor is assumed, and active in-class support is provided to help students develop a constructive and coherent approach. The rationale for developing confidence in capturing self-awareness is to encourage criticality and lateral thinking in promoting deeper ownership of the learning process by students.

The institutional VLE is perhaps an obvious locus for the convergence of Blake et al.'s (2022) foundations of belonging. The use of Aula provides the virtual part of the learning blend that fosters connections, supports networks and encourages community engagement amongst students. As well as the delivery of asynchronous content, Aula facilitates both an asynchronous space for questions and discussion, interactions and feedback between learners and staff teaching on ASPIRE as an extension of extra-curricular support (Dale & Lane, 2004). Aula is used as a flexible, effective way to deliver asynchronous material which complements the face-to-face sessions (Brown & Foster, 2023), and students are invited to engage with the asynchronous content in support of developing their confidence of a learning theme. The organisation of the asynchronous material mirrors the student journey, with Aula itself acting as a resource in support of an extended induction, where students can access module materials as well as guidance on wider university support services and academic-related content. Colleagues within the institution's Professional Services teams (Academic Skills, Careers, Wellbeing and Counselling) created asynchronous content for Aula which supports teaching staff in bringing each learning theme into the classroom and simultaneously scaffolding and extending student engagement with both preparatory and follow-up reading/ activities (Brown & Foster, 2023).

e-portfolio as assessment

The summative assessment attached to the module takes an e-portfolio form. The multiple components of the assessment (action plan, summary of engagement with meta-skills choices and reflective essay) are each completed on the Pebblepad e-portfolio platform. The e-portfolio workspace also allows students to capture weekly reflections and curate resources used in/ created via group tasks and activities. The evidence collated within the e-portfolio allows students to surface and evaluate their goals and document the development journey throughout ASPIRE.

Fundamental to the e-portfolio design is positioning students as empowered and autonomous in identifying and pursuing their long term learning and development objectives in the context of exploring longitudinal possibilities and potential (Kishi et al., 2023).

The ASPIRE e-portfolio interprets the term as a way of enabling students to capture learning over time and share reflections of their application of APPD principles to other contexts. With a specific focus on module learning and not necessarily asking students to curate artefacts from other sites of learning, we appreciate and acknowledge that this is our own interpretation of an e-portfolio is influenced by wider constructions of this type of tool but refines to facilitate reflective learning within a specific context (Slepcevic-Zach & Stock (2018).

The e-portfolio is a digital tool that is intended to support students to practice digital writing practices (Johinke et al., 2023) and to document the individual student journey throughout ASPIRE, providing opportunity for engagement with APPD principles and practices. It provides the opportunity for students to express and reflect on their personal and professional identity, as well as consider their values, goals, and development needs. We argue that use of an e-portfolio, in this context, is a powerful way to enhance student belonging at university, in encouraging and expecting student to actively participate in making connections, engaging in inclusive and accessible learning that embraces diversity, offering explicit, structured longitudinal support and encouraging active learner autonomy.

Weaver et al.(2008) suggest student engagement correlates closely with the range of learning materials available, and that motivation to interact is influenced by accessible, logical, and easy to navigate materials. In this context, a digital assessment that encourages the student to reflect holistically, and retrospectively, on their engagement in a breadth of learning themes and experiences has potential to be a meaningful developmental activity that adds to a sense of contribution and achievement. Reflective components that ask students to express values, priorities and aspects of identity is a potentially impactful way to add to initiatives that integrate and recognise explicit acknowledgement of the student's valued position within and contribution to the university community in highlighting the importance of belonging.

Observations

The scale of the implementation of the ASPIRE module and the drive to assure discipline-specific contextualisation of the curriculum has brought a discernible need for partnership across the university. Now in its second year of implementation, delivery, based on ongoing conversations with multiple levels of stakeholders, continues to inform development and enhancement. ASPIRE is currently delivered to over 700 students across 27 academic programmes at SCQF level 7; as such, operationalising contextualisation of non-subject to benefit the development of professional learning and values (Young, 2013) has been far from straightforward.

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We share, here, some observations on unique contributions that the module might have made to wider institutional efforts to promote and engender student belonging.

Extending the blend: The blended approach that has been applied to the delivery of ASPIRE this academic year attempts to provide comprehensive, collaborative, structured and personalised learning for students who take part in the module. The continuity of the Aula materials in support of discursive group and individual learning offer a linkages between content and experience and affirm a student-centred perspective to promoting choice and co-creation. The Aula materials act as a reference and in-class augmentation resource for both teaching staff and students, to offer additional opportunities to extend knowledge and learning beyond the classroom. The blended approach also supports preparation for and engagement in completion of the e-portfolio assessment as part of a continuum of blended support to allow students to articulate their learning and development gain.

Individual belonging/ mattering in a collaborative context: In addition to active weekly teaching sessions, students are invited to attend individual appointments (virtual or physical) with teaching staff to discuss, in the first term, their progress and perceptions and, in the second term, the formative feedback they received on their action plan, the choices that they have made in their learning (specifically with regard to meta-skills) as well as their engagement in group work, wider learning and to reflect on achievements or challenges within their learning. These sessions allow students to share transition experiences and a sense of their place in the university community. Students have an opportunity to be individually recognised, to have their identity and experience in focus; to matter. Their strengths are valued and reinforced, their identities appreciated and endorsed. ASPIRE promotes belonging and mattering by facilitating supportive relationships between staff and students and in peer groups in the belief that students' actions have significance and impact on themselves and others (Gravett et al., 2021).

Discussion: Speculative points for practice

The design and implementation of ASPIRE has not been without its challenges, and, indeed, continuous improvement is a key short and longer-term priority. Delivery for the forthcoming academic year will be shaped by stakeholder, practitioner and student feedback collected through a breadth of means (questionnaires, focus groups, consultation events) intended to gather a realistic, constructively critical and meaningful view of the opportunities that the module affords.

Reflecting on the lifecycle approach taken to operationalising the module values and principles, we suggest a few speculative points of practice to share with our community.

Context in balance: Unsurprisingly, the contextualisation of the APPD curriculum to make use of discipline-specific examples, topics, constructs and terminology has been crucial to building contribution from the academic community as well as encouraging student engagement. Referring to subject-dependent scenarios in, for example, articulating the process of reflective practice or learner responsibility with academic integrity, provided needed and tangible structure and familiarity when negotiating topics that require a degree of subjective, learner-centred exploration. Developing a centralised APPD curriculum framework that can be individualised to the requirements of differing academic programmes requires interoperation of the central team with practitioners in academic schools. There is also a balance to be achieved in meaningful delivery of a relevant, practical and contemporary curriculum which preserves core tenets of APPD delivery whilst appreciatively being informed by the subject context.

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A negotiated, distributed approach: The many dimensions of stakeholders mentioned in the section above, who influence development and delivery both vertically and horizontally, do contribute to that 'whole-of-institution' approach that shapes an integrated community of practice around the development of the APPD curriculum. Whilst the size and diversity of that community might necessitate clear communications and nuanced partnership working, it is a key attribute in designing and aligning the implementation of a curriculum that is responsively created. Featured sessions facilitated by, for example, the careers service, or library visits allow students to engage with the wider experiential (and physical) university and explore ways in which their journey might be supported.

Agency and co-creation: Constant improvement also drawn on insights from the creation of a learning space that encourages students to develop a confident voice in becoming co-creators of learning. Responsibilities in setting active learning goals, mapping learning development aspirations to agentic choices of meta-skill sessions and influencing in-class topics around identity performance and relational ways of being in the university community are all ways in which students bring ways of belonging and mattering into the collaborative teaching space.

Where do we go from here?

Academic year 24/25 will see the third implementation of the ASPIRE module. The central APPD team will work closely with school-based colleagues to learn from approaches and actions that have been successful and identify aspects of the curriculum that would benefit from enhancement. Qualitative experiential evaluation will gather perspectives that will inform revision of the learning themes and delivery approaches, and perspectives will be sought from practitioners and participating students. The APPD team are also particularly keen to have the approach informed by models in development or already being implemented by other institutions across the tertiary sector, in the acknowledgement that the UWS approach is one way of articulating values and aspirations held across the academic community.

Biographies

Caroline Fleeting is a lecturer within the Learning Transformation team at the University of the West of Scotland. She teaches on the institution-wide ASPIRE APPD module, supporting students to develop embedded self actualisation practices. Caroline is committed to equipping students with the confidence to make meaningful connections in their learning within and beyond university.

Vic Boyd is Senior Lecturer in APPD at UWS, leading the ASPIRE module as part of UWS's curriculum framework. research and practice interests lie in inclusive practice, mutability of student identity and learner-led writing development initiatives.

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