Belonging, Places, and Digital Spaces: A Value-Creative Inquiry

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Belonging is increasingly recognized as a missing feature of contemporary life. As neighbors no longer talk to neighbors, children no longer play after school in the local park, church membership declines, and jobs become more siloed, people exist in more and more isolated bubbles. In the midst of this social dynamic, the need to foster belonging has been identified as essential not only for mental health in general, but also for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.¹

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and other racial violence, attention to the need for culturally responsive teaching and sense of belonging of students of color has heightened. Yet, educational institutions have been slow to respond to the need to cultivate belonging, and teachers and students alike struggle to cope with feelings of pressure, isolation, and anxiety. The situation has been exacerbated during the isolation enforced by the global pandemic. As two instructors in higher education who value belonging, we find ourselves grappling with how to create belonging in this new Zoom, hybrid, Teams, trimodal, Google Meet, asynchronous, synchronous, digital world.

The COVID pandemic forced many higher education faculty into a new digital space, a space lacking the physicality of a place, an abstract space where we were challenged to continue functioning, as much as possible, according to the normalcy we had prior to the pandemic. We desperately tried to push through and make do with whatever technological abilities we could quickly acquire. However, in retrospect, this new experience brought into sharp relief something we had been struggling with but not closely attending to until the double punch of George Floyd’s murder and the pandemic—belonging.

Like many people who have reevaluated their lives during the pandemic, we felt compelled to reexamine our understanding of belonging and community. As extended periods of isolation spread among family, students, and colleagues, we, too, were affected in both visible and subtle ways. Thus, in this paper we investigate our own relationship to belonging and how we challenged ourselves to foster a sense of belonging with our students and colleagues as we transitioned from a physical place to a digital space. We conduct a value-creative inquiry into the role of belonging through the dialogic sharing of our personal and professional histories. We begin by recounting personal experiences of belonging and its absence. These narratives, originally uncovered through duoethnographic inquiry,² illustrate connections between a sense of belonging and the place of school and inform our current efforts to cultivate belonging in our classrooms and in our professional relationships with colleagues. Next, we examine how, in response to pandemic conditions, we find that without a


shared place, we must be more explicit and intentional about creating a community and sense of belonging. In the discussion section, we examine Block’s five principles of strategy to build community\(^3\) as we reflect on our experiences during COVID. Finally, we consider what aspects of our experiences during COVID we will carry forward into our post-pandemic classrooms.

**Belonging and Place**

Located geographically in a midpoint between the authors’ residences, Krema, a coffee shop frequented by locals in a small Illinois town, has served as a place of belonging for us.

Once you enter the cafe, the dim, warm lights and the faint jazz music in the background welcome you into the open space. When you step in further, there are eight colorful paintings on one side of the wall that represent significant figures from diverse backgrounds and periods, many of whom fought for justice and civil rights. In a small, predominantly white, Midwestern town, such a wall makes a statement. Although the clerks do not always greet us by name, it is a place where we feel welcome. As we meet in this place and engage in deep dialogues about our personal lives and our teaching experiences and collaborate on research projects, it has become a place where we experience a sense of belonging.

Block posits that the term *belong* has two meanings.\(^4\) The first meaning is to be a part of something and to know that you are not alone or an outsider. The second meaning is to feel ownership, accountability, and agency from being a part of something. Through belonging, human beings begin to recognize their connectedness and develop their capacity to empathize and care for others. As we work in parallel at the cafe that has become so familiar to us, we feel like we are not alone; we are in “our” coffee shop, a place where friendship and agency exist. We appreciate the banter of the servers behind the counter and enjoy the sense of fellowship with the friends group chatting excitedly at the table next to us, the studious young man focused on his computer screen, and the elderly couple enjoying their lattes in peaceful companionship.

We first discovered the significance of belonging in our own lives when we began exploring our past educational experiences through duoethnography research. We realized that, as children, we sometimes experienced schools as places of belonging, but at other times, we felt as though we were outsiders. In addition, due to our individual social positions, our experiences of belonging were quite different. Our experiences confirmed what research has found: that a sense of belonging is a fundamental and psychological human need to feel connected to a certain

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\(^4\) Block, *Community*. 
Belonging provides a sense of security that connects to well-being and away from feelings of isolation. As we found, the human need to belong begins early in childhood and continues throughout adulthood.

Revisiting our work now, during the pandemic, we realize the significance of place in our memories of belonging. When we belong, we belong somewhere. Our memories of both belonging and being outsiders are all tied to specific places: a young Julie, staring through doors at her mother, panicked at almost getting left behind in a subway car in New York City. A young Melissa, swimming in the lake, watching grown-ups stop by in their boats at all times of the day to sit on the patio, play a game of euchre, or drink a beer. Elementary student Julie, US-born citizen, feeling like a perpetual outsider—a foreigner—when she went to school and was assigned into an ESL (now called ELL) program because she was quiet in class; in graduate school, being mistaken as someone “visiting” from another country as she walked through the campus hallway. Elementary student Melissa, understanding after hearing Julie’s experience that she always felt like she belonged to her small Catholic school but also felt left out of the friends’ group, wishing she lived in town, where some of her classmates had lots of siblings and friends who played together in the neighborhood. This led us to wonder, can belonging exist without a physical place?

As Donald notes, place is generally used to indicate location. A place has unique qualities that foster affinity. Space, on the other hand, is a more abstract notion. Donald argues that space has displaced place in curriculum, leading to neglect of the intimate connections a place gives to life and living. Through the notion of space, the particularities of a place only matter when they serve as an abstract domain; place is thus “transformed into an empty space ready to be occupied by the anthropocentric imagination.”

Further, standardization, which allows curriculum to be applied anywhere, promotes a lack of attention to particularities of place. Meaningful connections are lost as place is “framed largely as the anthropocentric space within which humans unilaterally think the world into being.” When viewed from this perspective, a digital space provides particular challenges to teachers and students who seek belonging.

School as a Place of Belonging

Studies have shown the importance of belonging in schools.

A sense of belonging—the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes. Goodenow defined belonging in schools as “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged” by their teachers and peers in their

8 Donald, “Place,” 158.
9 Donald, “Place,” 159.
classroom interactions. In other words, students feel they are an integral part of the school. Other studies have connected this basic human need of connectedness and relatedness to motivation.\(^\text{12}\) In particular, studies have shown how feelings of inclusion or connectedness affect a person’s intrinsic motivation. Similarly, in the context of schools, studies explore the connections of belongingness to learners’ engagement and academic motivation.\(^\text{13}\) When students’ sense of belonging is high, there are also indications of higher academic success.\(^\text{14}\) In comparison, Abdollahi, Panahipour, Akhavan, and Allen suggest that students with a low sense of belonging might exhibit higher levels of academic stress.\(^\text{15}\) Based on a comprehensive review of school belonging, St-Amand, Girard, and Smith suggest there are four key attributes important for school belonging, including positive emotions, positive relations with peers and students, willingness to be involved, and ability to be nimble and harmonize in any situation.\(^\text{16}\)

One of the dimensions to belonging is place: a place that is shared and created by those who act within a shared location.\(^\text{17}\) While place-based belonging is minimally explored in scholarship, it has been defined as the affective feeling of being at home in a place.\(^\text{18}\) Such a place can be a home, a classroom, a workplace or a neighborhood. In such places, where people care about the place, the people in it, and negotiate its use, it can become a place of meaning and belonging. In particular, a caring education focused on relations and connectedness has continuity of place.\(^\text{19}\) Adopting Dewey’s notion of continuity, Noddings proposes four dimensions of continuity: purpose, people, place, and curriculum. These dimensions of continuity help build stability and structure for relations and care to develop in schools. In particular, we focus specifically on continuity of place, given that we are experiencing a time when changing contexts create instability in students’ homes, communities, and social structures. In 2020, the pandemic disrupted whatever continuity of place students had experienced in school up to that point, disrupting the emotional relationship a student might experience with their school environment.

Exploring Our Experiences of Belonging

To explore the fundamental need to belong, we begin with our personal experiences of


\(^{13}\) Goodenow, “Classroom Belonging among Early Adolescent Students.”


belonging and alienation in schools. We review our childhood experiences, and then consider some key moments in adulthood when we found or created places of belonging for ourselves. Finally, we examine our current experiences of belonging and isolation as faculty in higher education as well as our efforts to create belonging in our classrooms. To conduct this exploration, we utilize value-creative inquiry, a dialogic approach in which we explore our narratives with the intention of creating value for ourselves and others. We met regularly over several months, both in person and through video conferencing, to share our stories and to document them. By exploring our stories dialogically, we sought to go beyond surfacing the influence of a socio-cultural phenomenon to consider what meaning we made from our challenging circumstances.

In our recent work, we engaged in a dialogic inquiry discussing research methodologies that aligned with a relational paradigm. As we collaborated, we recognized that within our methodological approaches of dialogic inquiry and narrative storytelling, there were significant overlaps, and both were significant to the inquiry. Thus, we named our merged, collaborative approach value-creating inquiry and identified five criteria that made this approach unique: intent to create value, collaboration, connectedness of dialogue and narrative inquiry, transformation, and levels or dimensions of storytelling.

Value creation, a term introduced by Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, refers to the process of enriching our lives for personal and societal flourishing. Ikeda describes this process as “to find meaning, to enhance one’s own existence and to contribute to the well-being of others.” As inquirers, we adopted Makiguchi and Ikeda’s intent to create value as a humanistic approach to research.

The first criteria, intent to create value, refers to the moment-to-moment compass that guides ongoing experience of researcher-participants in their process to find deeper meaning and significance. As we engage in inquiry or dialogue, we enter the space with the awareness and commitment to create value and meaning together. Collaboration reflects the negotiation and decision-making process of editing and revising what information to include and omit between researcher-participants. For this article, we conducted a self-study so it was only between the researchers using Google documents to negotiate the direction of the paper. However, when we conduct interviews with our participants, collaboration is also seen in the process of honoring our participants’ voices and inviting them to take part in the editing process to ensure accurate representation of their stories and perspectives.

Connectedness of dialogue and narrative inquiry highlights the contribution of both methods in the inquiry process, such as the importance of

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challenging and probing in dialogue as well as the storytelling process in narrative inquiry. As we enter this space of inquiry, we take a dialogic approach to begin asking questions that stimulate a narrative response. Dialogue is then used to challenge and probe one another’s stories that are shared to guide us in a reflective space. This takes us to the next criteria.

Transformation is an outcome of the dialogic interaction between researcher-participants that demonstrates how new meaning or understanding is found from the transaction or engagement between researchers and participants. Each of our stories shared here are representations of what manifested through the dialogic transaction.

The last criterion, the level or dimensions of storytelling, is twofold. It recognizes the various voices that are weaving in and out of the inquiry as well as the various storytelling approaches that are shaped and shared in the inquiry. For example, there will be direct quotes in this paper from the researchers and a few student quotes selected from assignments to bring voices into storytelling. There will also be a narrative story representing the two researchers’ lived experiences and a collective voice narrating those stories.

Our Experiences of Alienation and Belonging

As we explored the intersection of belonging and school, we discovered a sense of alienation and fear of being judged, which created distance between us and our fellow students and teachers. However, we recognized that there were differences between various arenas of belonging: belonging to family, belonging to a school community (both with peers and with teachers), and belonging on a social level varied significantly. Each connected to a specific place, the particularities of which shaped our experiences of belonging. While we noted changes in belonging at different times in our lives, Julie and Melissa both found belonging within their families.

Julie, as a non-white student in large urban, public schools in New York and Los Angeles, always felt like an outsider, even though she was a US citizen. She grew up in a home where Japanese was the primary language; her parents were first generation Japanese immigrants. By being raised in a Japanese household, she felt a cultural dissonance in schools that made her feel like a foreigner.

I remember feeling culturally disconnected with the people and the classroom. As a result, I was often daydreaming in class. My fourth-grade teacher somehow assumed I could not speak or understand English well and assigned me to an ESL (now formally called ELL) classroom during certain periods. I remember desperately asking my mom to buy the perfect Snoopy cup for this fourth-grade teacher. I felt compelled to find a way to make her happy and to make her like me. When I think back to that moment, a feeling of anxiety wells up. It felt like my life depended on this one cup. Reflecting back to this moment, I realize now that I was longing for the basic human need for connection.

Julie’s experience reflects a lower sense of belonging and lack of ownership of the place she inhabited.26

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The physical structures at school also made it difficult for her to belong. The fences that were intended to protect students and keep outsiders from coming inside made her feel like she was trapped and caged. Most of her teachers seemed indifferent and did not make an effort to connect with her or help make her feel connected with others. She felt insignificant, a number in the classroom. She often reasoned to herself, “Well, teachers also have their own lives to think about. Why would they care about us?”

Culturally, I felt like I didn’t fit in, and my environment constantly reminded me of that. Fortunately, I felt safe and valued when I was home with my parents and siblings. In a world where I felt disconnected, my home was the only place where I felt like I truly belonged.

While she was bothered about not being included, Julie did not even dream of being on top of the social hierarchy. The message she gleaned from her environment was, “I have to know my place.” Julie’s family situation, moving from New York to California, and her sense of disconnection and lack of care at school, reflect the lack of continuity of place.

Julie’s early childhood experiences led her to seek friends from the same racial backgrounds as she grew older. She reached out to Asian students because they were similar to her. She thought race and culture were a big part of what might help her feel like she belonged. She found herself moving between groups that were partially defined by her identity as an Asian-American, but she never quite found her home. She never knew for sure how many of her experiences had to do with her identity or were just part of the typical social challenges created by the age-segregated social structure of school.

On the other hand, circumstances changed for her after high school. At her small liberal arts college, Soka University of America (SUA), she felt noticed and valued. It was a place where the student and staff demographic were more diverse and included a large body of international students. Julie was surprised to feel a sense of belonging for the first time outside her family home. Even if she simply missed a class, it was noticed by others, leaving her with the feeling that she mattered.

My professors and classmates would reach out if they didn’t see me. There were high expectations for every student and I felt a sense of accountability and responsibility not only to myself but also to the campus community. Small but meaningful interactions empowered me to believe in my own potential. The school culture fostered a strong sense of agency and desire to contribute and be part of a larger community.

Julie’s SUA experience demonstrates the importance of Noddings’ continuity of place. It was her first time to be in one place (school) for more than 3 years. When she felt cared for and when a school was guided by an intent to foster agency, her past and present experiences guided her own intent to care for others. Julie’s personal childhood and college experience led her to pursue a career in education because she wanted to support future students. Knowing the importance of belonging, she wanted to foster connections the way she had experienced them in
college in order to empower other students’ ability to contribute to society.

Melissa never questioned whether she belonged in her small, K-8 Catholic school. Her parents and grandmothers both lived in the town where she grew up and regularly came to functions at the school. Though her family did not typically socialize with the rest of the families at her church, Melissa’s mother ran the Girl Scout troop, so she felt she was part of a community that stretched beyond the school day. Upon hearing Julie’s experience, Melissa explained,

I never felt like I was an unknown person or anonymous, even though I did notice that belonging was tied to my religious identity. It was clear to me that my town was divided by church affiliation. But within my small school, I knew just about every adult and child in the building and I suppose everyone knew me as well. I didn’t really appreciate the value of the belonging that surrounded me until hearing your [Julie’s] experience.

At the same time that Melissa had a sense of community belonging, she also felt like an outsider with her peers. Most of the girls in the class had large families with older siblings and lived in town. Melissa lived outside of town and was the oldest of three, so she did not have the benefit of being around older children she could learn from.

Three of the girls in my class lived a block from each other and were best friends. They had older siblings and they played sports together, knew what music was popular, and had fashionable haircuts. As a child living in the country without older siblings or cousins to learn from, I felt socially awkward and I was jealous of the three friends who were so close.

In Melissa’s story, continuity of place also played a significant role. She continued to attend her small but intimate school where she felt a sense of belonging. At the same time, she felt a lack of belonging in terms of community. Everybody mainly lived in town while Melissa lived outside of town, reinforcing the sense of alienation that stuck with Melissa. As she got older, Melissa felt stifled in her small town, and was happy to graduate high school and attend a university in a large metropolitan area.

Once she became a middle school science teacher, her school experiences lingered in her memories. While she did her best to create opportunities for her students to connect and feel a sense of belonging, she could not help but wonder if there might be a way to create a school environment that was more conducive to building community.

I didn’t like the distance that I perceived between myself and my students. Often, I felt that, as the all-knowing purveyor of content and as the enforcer of behavior rules, I was powerless to create authentic connections with or for my students. Further, no matter what I did in the classroom, I only saw my students for 40 minutes a day over the course of one school year. It didn’t seem like a very natural way of knowing and being with each other. I knew young people had many struggles with peer interactions, unhappy families, or academic pressures, and I was disappointed that school was not a community that could support them through those struggles.

After having her own children, Melissa came upon a book that described the Sudbury Valley School, a school of self-directed education that is run democratically by students and staff. She became fascinated with the idea that school did not have to employ coercion in order for students to have successful lives after graduation.

Once I read about self-directed education, I knew there was no way I could go back to teaching in a conventional school. I felt compelled to create a similar environment like The Sudbury Valley School where students could play and
pursue their interests with other community members of all ages, make decisions collaboratively to run the school, and feel a sense of ownership of the place where they spent their days. Even more, I craved an environment where I, as a staff member, would no longer be the “enemy” of students but would be an organic part of their community. The idea was exhilarating and freeing.

Melissa’s experience of wishing for more friendship and a community of children contributed to her desire to belong in adulthood and propelled her to create an alternative to conventional schooling. The school she founded, Tallgrass Sudbury School, is now in its fourteenth year. Transitioning into higher education, Melissa’s experiences of belonging and community inform her work and her classroom practice. Similarly, Julie’s childhood and college experience with belonging motivated her to pursue a career in education. Her own personal struggles and lived experiences guide her drive to foster belongingness in her own classrooms. The lens from which she builds her curriculum and teaching practices are informed by an ethic of care, teacher-student relationships, culturally relevant pedagogy and practice, student-centered practice, leadership development, and moral and character education.

Belonging in Higher Education

By examining our childhood experiences of belonging, we realized how much our desire to belong and our experiences of alienation were deep motivators for our desire to create a sense of belonging for our students and for ourselves in our roles as faculty at higher education institutions. Melissa, who teaches at an urban, predominantly white institution with a higher-than-average population of minority and first-generation college students, felt a strong need to effectively support belonging, which was all the more pressing during the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. For Julie, who experienced firsthand the challenges of belonging as a minority student of color, creating a space for belonging was further informed by a desire to cultivate an inclusive, equitable, and ethical community. The sudden transition to online and hybrid learning modalities we encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic brought the need to create belonging in online modalities to the forefront.

Belonging and Online Learning

Online learning has become vital to meeting the needs of learners who would otherwise have limited access to education. Online platforms allow flexibility for individuals who have professional or personal commitments that challenge them to be present in face-to-face classroom instructions. Online learning has become crucial for educational institutions, especially those that are grappling with enrollment and economic challenges. Institutions have been slowly adopting this growing market. At the same time, there are concerns whether online learning is effective and provides the equivalent quality experience and outcome for learners. Higher education institutions, especially large institutions, have limitations that disrupt the continuity of place, especially as courses are term-specific and take place in various buildings and locations. However, an online space further disrupts continuity of place. With limited opportunities to feel belonging, student retention rates and student success can be low.

Thus, the social presence of others and the degree that the virtual connection feels “real” can help foster belonging in online classes.\textsuperscript{28} Learners who experienced more engagement and collaboration with their peers online feel a greater sense of belonging and fewer feelings of isolation, while the lack of such interaction may affect student retention.\textsuperscript{29} Instructor-learner and peer-to-peer interaction support student retention and student success.\textsuperscript{30} This points to the importance of structure and the instructors’ efforts to prepare a space and environment for peer engagement and learning—even in online settings. When the setting is structured to include activities, participants engage in deeper discussions.\textsuperscript{31} Other structural methods to improve presence and connection include using rich media technologies that provide a feeling of connection such as videos, audios, and synchronous meetings.\textsuperscript{32} Even the surface-level or off-topic conversations that develop in chat spaces foster social presence.\textsuperscript{33} Unfortunately, students in asynchronous settings report feeling more individualistic and feel less classroom-level belonging in comparison to those in synchronous online courses.\textsuperscript{34}

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\textsuperscript{29} Lisa Thomas, James Herbert, and Marko Teras, “A Sense of Belonging to Enhance Participation, Success and Retention in Online Programs.”

\textsuperscript{30} Susi Peacock et al., “An Exploration into the Importance of a Sense of Belonging for Online Learners,” \textit{International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning} 21, no. 2 (2020), 18–35.


\textsuperscript{33} Alberto Beuchot and Mark Bullen, “Interaction and Interpersonality in Online Discussion Forums,” \textit{Distance Education} 26, no. 1 (2005), 67–87; Christine E. Wade et al., “Are Interpersonal Relationships Necessary for Developing Trust in Online Group Projects?,” \textit{Distance Education} 32, no. 3 (2011), 383–96.


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\textbf{Fostering Belonging during Remote Learning}

Julie’s full-time higher education teaching position was offered to her during the same academic year when COVID hit (2019-2020), while Melissa was finishing her second year of teaching educational leadership at her institution.

During the height of the pandemic, Melissa taught both synchronous and asynchronous online courses, while Julie taught asynchronous and Hy-Flex courses (in-person instruction while also offering synchronous instruction at the same time). For all members involved on campus, including faculty, staff, and students, the COVID pandemic was a challenging and emotionally-draining experience as people navigated both their personal and professional lives. Melissa recalls,

Fortunately, I had received an initial training in online course delivery and had taught some online classes before the pandemic hit. In contrast, many of my colleagues had never taught an online class and had no training in using our online platform beyond turning the class on, emailing students, and posting a syllabus. I spent many hours supporting faculty in my department, both emotionally and with instructional...
design assistance, as my colleagues navigated the transition to online teaching. The adjustment was a major stressor during an already difficult time.

Students were equally stressed out. Many students were experiencing anxiety and struggling with their mental health and depression. Accommodating and providing support was a priority shared in both Julie’s college and Melissa’s university. As Julie recounts,

When we transitioned into a completely remote learning space, some of the common narratives that were echoed across the administration and faculty was to err on the side of compassion and empathy. There were students who had to support their families while keeping up with school. Some students experienced family deaths while trying to stay afloat in this unknown situation. Others felt isolated and alone. While some students adapted to the unknown and new learning environment, other students struggled to keep up due to various circumstances.

With the growing impact of COVID, Julie sensed a fear of connecting, but also a longing for connection at the same time as people created distance from one another. This led her to implement a number of strategies in her online and face-to-face, HyFlex environments.

In my unique classroom setup, which was an intersection of space and place, I focused on activities that encouraged interactions and discussions that would help build connection and relations with one another, especially across the in-person and online boundary.

Julie explains some of the strategies she applied to ensure undergraduate students felt belonging. The first was creating class norms. This was particularly important during the pandemic. Her class took time in small and large groups to discuss their individual expectations, values, and how they felt they should engage with one another in Zoom and remote settings, how they should act and behave with their masks, and how to handle food and drinks in the classroom. Instead of presenting the class with already formed policies or expectations, they took time to discuss and make decisions together as a new community in order to feel comfortable and accountable and to feel a sense of ownership of their space and place.

Next was requesting students to take ownership of making the class inclusive. To ensure that every voice was heard and not missed in the classroom, Julie asked in-person students to be a voice for the remote learners if they were raising their hand or making comments in the chat space. To create an inclusive space, in-person students were asked to bring their laptops to join Zoom during class. Audio was a challenge for the HyFlex classrooms because most classrooms were not yet equipped with microphones to collect all the voices in the classroom. Even if the students heard the instructor’s voice, most remote students could not hear the other students in the classroom speaking. This made learning difficult if the classroom structure was based on discussions. Thus, in-person students were asked to unmute to talk and put their cameras on for the online learners. Although small and frustrating, it was an important conscious and considerate act that they all committed to doing. To promote interactions between in-person and remote students, Julie also sometimes assigned small group discussions that had a mix of in-person and online learners. In short, to ensure that remote learners felt like they belonged and were a part of the class, Julie made sure to call on students who were joining remotely as much as she called on students in-person.

Next, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy. In addition to fostering a space of critical thinking for students, Julie reflected critically on her own teaching and examined whether the learning environment was representative and inclusive in terms of content and message. Were the
materials and resources culturally diverse and representative? She reviewed the textbooks, activities, and resources she was utilizing to diversify the materials. Julie also created opportunities for peer learning and interactions using different applications to try to reach diverse learners.

Next, scheduling one-on-one meetings and group meetings. Midway through the semester, Julie incorporated a 15-minute, one-on-one meeting with all her students outside of class. This was an opportunity to personally connect with students, discuss their individual performances thus far, and provide an opportunity where students could voice their concerns or evaluation of the course. She also held weekly group meetings outside of class with the group assigned to present that week to help them prepare for the presentation.

Next, creating time for informal conversations. A short, five-minute activity was held at the beginning of class as a space to share concerns or tips with one another about how they were navigating through this challenging time. Sometimes Julie asked students to share an emoji or describe in one word how they were feeling. At other times the class created a list of uplifting or soothing songs that helped them get through the day.

During a time of uncertainty, these activities were a way to shift the conversation to acknowledge that they all were going through this together before moving on to lectures or class work.

Finally, gratitude message. At the end of each semester in 2020, when students did their final presentation online, Julie asked students to share in open mic-style a short message of appreciation related to the class. She found that students enjoyed this meaningful closure and that most students wanted to share something. It was a way to feel united and connected.

These types of activities were instrumental in ensuring the student online felt more connected to classmates and the instructor. Unless instructors create a sense of belonging, students online may only see coursework as a collection of tasks to complete. In such a space, learners need to trust one another and feel connected to each other to create effective social spaces online. Thus, both Julie and Melissa found ways of using technology to build connections. For example, Melissa used Calendly, a scheduling application, to meet with each student for 15 minutes at the beginning of the quarter. Like Julie, she used VoiceThread—a collaborative platform with video, voice, and text commenting—to promote a less formal, more natural class discussion than can be achieved through written discussion boards. Although Melissa prefers seminar-style discussions to lectures in her face-to-face, graduate-level courses, she created video lectures so the students could feel more instructor presence. Furthermore, both Melissa and Julie found these additional strategies helpful for completely remote courses:

1. Multimedia: Since there are limitations to online modalities, utilizing multimedia technology applications to engage various learners was an important structure for students to feel connected and motivated. In addition to their respective institutions’ learning management systems, they incorporated applications such as VoiceThread and Padlet (a real-time collaborative web platform for uploading, organizing, and sharing content to virtual bulletin boards) to encourage creative engagement with course content.


2. **Instructor-student relationship:** In order for students to feel connected as much as possible, instructor engagement is the strategy most commonly mentioned by students as effective. Thus, Julie and Melissa responded promptly, provided timely feedback, and scheduled virtual appointments whenever necessary to increase their online presence with students.

3. **Team building:** Despite an asynchronous modality, Julie and Melissa ensured peer learning and interaction by creating teams to encourage connection and relationship. During this period, students were required to collaborate with or respond specifically to their assigned team members.

4. **Opening & Closure:** At the beginning and end of courses, discussion board threads and VoiceThreads were structured for building community by creating a space for students to introduce themselves during the opening week and to experience closure at the end of the course to share their appreciation and farewell to one another. For example, Melissa invited students to introduce themselves by describing a favorite childhood place and asked students to reflect on the affordances and constraints of the online experience via VoiceThread at the end of the quarter.

In various ways, both Julie and Melissa structured their learning environments, whether in the physical space or in the online space, for community building through strengthening associational life and incorporating small group interactions. Students in Julie's courses shared how they were able to make friends in her class, which was an unusual experience for students during the pandemic when they had limited interaction or engagement with their peers.

Accompanying, one undergraduate student taking her HyFlex instruction shared:

> I want to express how this class has been very different from any other class I have been a part of . . . One thing I really liked was the learning environment because I was able to make new friends and collaborate and communicate with my classmates like I never really have before. This was unexpected since half the class was online. This was a really good way to make new connections and bring the class together like a community. I would highly recommend this class for others because it really helps you break out of your shell and learn about leadership with a hands-on approach.

Similarly, students taking her asynchronous course shared:

> I enjoyed the team interaction and I believe it brought the comments and conversation into a more authentic and richer space. The comments by my team members were encouraging and guiding. Sometimes I would watch their VoiceThreads and then wanted to add even more to mine! The team orientation had a significant impact in a good way. I was very happy to establish a better connection with a smaller group of people. I looked forward to our interactions and I do feel that we were able to develop a great rapport with each other.

The statements by the students in both the HyFlex and asynchronous courses demonstrate that it is possible to foster connection and belonging in online courses and, further, how that experience motivates students to continue being engaged in their learning environment. Still, it should be noted that, while the strategies we mention were successful for many cases, at the same time, there were also challenges. Due to an ambiguous attendance policy, students in Julie's HyFlex classes missed more class sessions in comparison to pre-COVID. There were also a few students who showed dissatisfaction toward peer interaction and preferred individualized,

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37 Block, Community.
self-paced courses. Although expectations for the peer engagement and learning were noted in the syllabus and also during the first day of the semester, there are always one or two students who express disapproval of peer assignments. Be that as it may, both Julie and Melissa discovered engagement strategies that they will carry forward with them in future classes post-pandemic.

Seeking Belonging during Remote Teaching

Turning from student belonging to faculty belonging, it should be noted that it is not uncommon for faculty members to experience a lack of belonging in higher education. As Block describes, a paradigm that perpetuates scarcity, individualism, and competition undermines belonging and community.  

The corporatization of higher education, the pressures of competition and the siloed organizational structures work against the creation of trusting relationships. As non-tenure-track faculty, Melissa and Julie inhabit a “separate but not quite equal” space due to their ambiguous status. Onboarding procedures were especially lacking in helping Melissa feel like she belonged. When she first worked for her institution as a graduate assistant, no one even spoke to Melissa as she sat alone in her office for her first few months. Now, as a faculty member, she finds that faculty are so busy that they seldom have time to work together as collaborators. Julie experienced similar experiences due to the timing of her hiring. She was hired during the academic year when the pandemic hit, which resulted in a year-long work isolation. It was difficult for Julie to feel connected to her colleagues since she was just beginning to get to know them.

Surprisingly, Melissa’s experience changed during the pandemic. Her college of education community, reeling after George Floyd’s murder and compelled by the subsequent protests, immediately searched for a meaningful response. A grassroots effort between faculty and staff members led to a number of initiatives, including anti-racism study and support groups. As part of this effort, Melissa found herself in Zoom meetings with a non-hierarchical mix of department assistants and other staff members, students, and tenured faculty from other departments. Many of these colleagues were people she did not really know prior to these online gatherings. Sometimes they discussed books like My Grandmother’s Hands or movies like the James Baldwin documentary, I Am Not Your Negro. At other times, the groups discussed how to facilitate anti-racism work at combined faculty and staff meetings or with students.

As she explained,

“Although I had received my doctorate from this institution and had subsequently taught there for two years at the time COVID-19 hit, the move to online meetings meant I was getting to know people other than my immediate coworkers for the first time. In addition, I was able to get to know them on a different level, one in which it was safe to be vulnerable. For the first time, I truly felt like I belonged to the college. Still, Melissa and her colleagues grappled with the challenges of reshaping an institution organized hierarchically and fraught, at times, with power dynamics and a scarcity mindset. Interestingly, long-time faculty members told Melissa

38 Block, Community.
40 Resmaa Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017).
that their new building has contributed to the lack of community. In the old building, because offices were located across the hall from one another, faculty members were more likely to see each other, to chat, and to keep their doors open. In the new building, while faculty have their own classrooms, offices are spread out and there is no good congregating area.

This observation lends credence to the idea that a place can shape belonging. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, discussions of a shared vision for their institution, such as how to build a healthier culture and how to resist neoliberal pressures, has created community. Furthermore, faculty and staff are using the lens of anti-racism to ask, “How do we create more relational and less hierarchical ways of knowing, being, and doing?” At her institution, Julie connected with the Center for Advancement of Faculty Excellence and attended various virtual events designed to support faculty instruction and professional development. These periodic events provided opportunities for faculty to connect during the pandemic.

Building Caring Communities

The pandemic brought immeasurable challenges to educators across the globe. Many of us were challenged to do something that we had never done before. Although we navigated uncharted territories, we drew on our resilience because of our desire to do the best for our students. Whether it was fully online or blended or HyFlex mode, we had to challenge ourselves in new ways to compensate for the lack of continuity of place, pushing against the highly abstract nature of digital spaces. By necessity, we learned how to use new tools and methods. While it is uncertain what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be relative to online course proliferation, evidence suggests that prioritizing belonging can contribute to student and faculty well-being whether we congregate in a physical place or only connect via a virtual space. Therefore, we utilize Block’s five principles for building community41 as a framework to discuss our experiences and consider what lessons will stay with us after the pandemic subsides.

Block suggests five principles to guide a strategy to build community. The first principle is to build a social fabric of care for, and accountability to, each other. Block argues that when we have caring relationships, we also feel accountable to one another and develop a community. Informed by her own lack of belonging during her schooling experiences, Julie had a strong desire to create caring relationships. Thus, she structured her course in a way for students to develop caring relationships with their instructor and peers. This allowed for students to feel a connection and a sense of community. Melissa sought caring relationships among faculty and staff at her institution and found her sense of community strengthening through the social fabric built around anti-racism work.

The second principle is to build a strong associational life through a shared purpose. Both incidental and planned meetings are opportunities for community building and social transformation. Julie and Melissa attempted to provide opportunities for associational life by creating structured assignments (group projects and discussions) and having meetings for learners to engage and foster organic connections with one another—while acknowledge that a higher education course is not always conducive to associating for a shared purpose. In contrast, both Melissa and Julie experienced associational life in earlier school experiences. Julie found relatedness in her college experience, and Melissa found it in the school she started. In addition, Melissa found the shared purpose of anti-racism to be a

41 Block, Community.
springboard for associational life at her institution.

The third principle for community-building strategies is the use of power to convene others to create an alternative future. Block argues that action is organic and emergent when driven by a shift in thinking and actions of individuals, not by organizations or leaders; thus, grassroots efforts build community. In both our cases, we did not necessarily wait for the institution to guide us in instructional methods for online instruction. Informed by our desire, we took it upon ourselves to foster spaces of belonging. Sometimes this meant taking initiative such as using tools the institution was not providing—for example, scheduling additional synchronous gatherings or adopting Zoom over Blackboard for virtual meetings because the Gallery feature better fostered community. Nevertheless, in a classroom, most gatherings are not organic and emergent, and even less so in the online environment, so this feature is difficult to cultivate as teachers. Melissa found parallels, however, at the organizational level of her university, where the anti-racism work was driven by faculty and staff rather than the administration of the college.

The fourth principle is the structure of small groups, the unit of size where transformation occurs. Small groups are where relationships are formed and change can take place. Block encourages us to let go of the idea of “scaling up” and instead argues that groups should be kept small to retain the power of citizens. Similarly, Ikeda advocates for a life-sized paradigm of change, one that “never deviates from the human scale.” According to Ikeda, a life-sized paradigm can combat the sense of powerlessness people feel in the face of systemic oppression. In our classes, we structured various small group activities that ranged from mini activities to group projects. We believe students felt a stronger sense of autonomy as a result. Further, as reflected in the student testimonials, engaging in small groups resulted in positive outcomes, including fostering friendships and engaging in deeper dialogue. At the institutional level, Melissa found her sense that she could make a difference in her institution to be greatly improved when she began engaging in small, online meetings with her colleagues.

The fifth principle for building community is changing the conversation in service of transformation. Although not discussed above, Julie and Melissa, as any good teacher might, included course content that helped students name problems and reframe conversations. In both classroom discussions and one-on-one meetings, we drew on course content to reframe or change the conversation with our students. Through dialogue on course content, students had the opportunity to reframe (e.g., from fear to hope), giving them a transformative context from which to build social capital. In a similar fashion, Melissa found that the anti-racism discussions taking place in her college of education empowered faculty, staff, and students alike to move toward transformation.

Through the lens of Block’s five principles for strategic community-building, our experiences of belonging and efforts to create community highlight the limitations of higher education classrooms. In face-to-face and online classes, we can practice community building strategies, but classrooms are not places where students freely organize and initiate grassroots efforts toward transformation. Thus, the level of belonging in relatively abstract spaces differs from a community that comes together organically in a specific place with the goal of transformation. On the other hand, our experiences outside the classroom, whether it be on a college campus, in a school of self-directed education, or as

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42 Daisaku Ikeda, “A Global Ethic of Coexistence: Toward a ‘Life-Sized’ Paradigm for Our Age,” 5,

colleagues in higher education, suggest that such strategies hold potential for initiating transformative change through belonging.

**Conclusion**

**COVID** brought into sharp relief the importance of community, belonging, and care. While electronic technology can be a convenience that isolates and disconnects us, it has also helped us maintain or stay connected during this time of adversity. In our challenge to create a place of belonging for our students, some emerging questions linger.

Informed and driven by our personal schooling experiences, we worked to create a space of belonging, even when we did not have a physical place to gather. However, an ongoing question for us is whether the online space can really replace the in-person experience, or whether the in-person place is necessary for a full sense of belonging and community. It seems unlikely that a child’s online interactions can produce the same kinds of physical and social-emotional benefits of in-person play identified by play researchers, such as self-regulation, perspective taking, making friends, and negotiation. If a face-to-face experience is a necessary human experience, to what degree can belonging be created in online spaces? This is a complex question that must be situated and considered contextually. Thus, in this article and discussion, we direct this question specifically to the higher education context. In the higher education context, we will most likely continue to be challenged with the reality that learners can more easily distance themselves when engaging virtually, instructors will be at different levels of commitment in terms of the delivery and structure of their instruction, and, with the changing times, institutions will continue to expand with remote digital learning. It will take both instructors and learners to create a space of belonging, but a prerequisite is that instructors provide an inclusive space of community and belonging.

Moving forward, we call attention to the implications of Donald’s distinction between place and space and Noddings’ notion of continuity of place. Since an online space calls for a high level of abstraction and lacks continuity of place, it creates additional challenges for students to feel a sense of belonging. However, Dewey’s notion of continuity, which argues that curriculum should be connected to the student’s personal experiences, their pasts and their futures, provides an opening for creating a sense of continuity and connection for students. Making course content and assignments relevant to students can naturally increase student academic belonging.

While we followed the third principle of using power to take initiative and create places for belonging and positive change in our own spaces, an ongoing question is how to change the larger institution. As Nunn states, students have different levels of belonging that affect their well-being and desire to stay or leave the institution. Our efforts in the classroom may be one where we can affect their academic belonging. But we must also consider the social and community campus aspects of belonging. What else is needed so that students feel belonging in all aspects of their college life?

As Block argues, when we feel belonging, we also develop care and accountability for our community. It is time for the basic human desire to belong, to be connected, to be a part of some place, to become a top priority for contemporary institutions.

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44 Nunn, *College Belonging.*