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Belonging in Space: Informal Learning Spaces and the Student Experience

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In the face of diverse challenges to traditional higher education (HE) models, creating and defining the value of an on-campus student experience has become a key concern for HE institutions. Originating in response to these challenges, The Belonging Project seeks to improve the student experience in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. As part of its pilot initiatives, we worked to refurbish an existing but underused space in the School, the Atelier. This paper documents the refurbishment and its outcomes, while situating the process within a broader literature on student engagement and transition.

Introduction

Student engagement is of increasing importance as several factors combine to reshape the contemporary higher education (HE) environment. Chief among these is the rapidly evolving technological environment in which universities operate, paving the way for the provision of more online learning options, and providing students with myriad social networking sites in which to extend the informal curriculum outside the classroom. Secondly, in Australia at least, increasing financial competition and a changed policy environment have led to higher enrolments and more students in classrooms. Students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds will make up increasing numbers of Australian university cohorts under government targets for their participation in HE.

In recent years, shifting political, economic and technological landscapes have seen an increasingly competitive higher education (HE) environment in Australia as well as abroad. Locally, quotas for the inclusion of more advanced students, active learning consists of applying works in their fields to the development and diverse cohorts, moves to increase the intake of international students, and a changed policy environment have combined over the past decade to apply new pressures on our HE institutions Globally, the introduction of new models of delivery, and, the promotion of MOOCs by respected institutions such as Harvard and MIT, has brought increased international competition to the sector. As universities grapple with the challenge of engaging students in this changing environment, the question of how to foster a sense of belonging between cohort peers, staff, and the institution becomes a key area of investigation (see Authors, 2013 for further articulation of this issue).

This paper explores these concerns through the case of The Belonging Project, a longitudinal learning and teaching project at the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. The project's broad aims are to investigate the student experience within the School and to develop a transferrable model to improve student engagement across the University. Through outlining the project's Student Informal Spaces Initiative, this paper documents the refurbishment of an informal student learning space (SLS; see Matthews, Andrews & Adams, 2011) to improve student engagement and sense of belonging in the School. Combining data from student focus groups, which evidenced a lack of space to foster the range of informal activities students participate in on and around campus, with awareness of an existing but underused space in our School building, we undertook the process of

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refurbishing a room known as the Student Atelier. Employing current and former students from our School and University, we adopted a co-creation methodology to rework the space aiming to improve our students' sense of connection to their cohort peers.

Our study contributes to the growing body of empirical evidence on student desires for and use of informal SLS. Adopting a methodology that is embedded in the research team's media, communication and design background, this project demonstrates a way to work collaboratively and inclusively with students in the design process. On a practical level, by documenting the development, implementation and evaluation of a newly refurbished informal SLS, we demonstrate some of the ways in which institutions can work to inoculate themselves against the range of threats that circulate around them in this changing HE environment.

The Belonging Narrative Model

The Atelier refurbishment originated as the key aim of our Student Informal Spaces Initiative (SISI), a pilot project undertaken in 2012 as part of our broader, four-year project. Situated within RMIT's University-wide Student Cohort Experience Project, the Belonging Project's chief aim is to improve the student experience – first in our School, and then, across the University – and with it, metrics of retention and success. In Phase One of the project we worked to develop the Belonging Narrative Model, based on close research with staff and students in our school. In Phase Two we drew on this model to introduce a new approach to transition and the first-year experience (FYE) in the school through five pilot initiatives focused on orientation, transition, cohort building, student spaces and academic skills and literacies. Our research during the first phase confirmed our hypothesis that we should begin by focusing on the FYE. The majority of the students who participated in focus groups were first years, and they confirmed what a large body of literature has found (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Kift, 2008; Devlin et al., 2012, Strayhorn, 2012) – that transition into first year is the most challenging for students and the most crucial for universities, to ensure retention and success in the long term. Our focus groups acknowledged that the transition to university represents both an academic and social shift for students "on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners" (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010, p. 3). But we also confirmed during Phase Two that these anxieties can be tackled, often with little expenditure of time and resources, and with significant impact.

In order to give shape to an 'ideal' student experience in our School, we developed our Belonging Narrative Model (see Figure 1 below), proposing a three-tier student experience, in line with the three-year structure of the undergraduate degree. In first year, students develop a sense of belonging as part of a program and disciplinary cohort. In second year, this is consolidated and extended as students find their feet as part of a broader interdisciplinary community within and across the School and University. By third year, students are extending their disciplinary and professional gaze to encompass global perspectives and to grasp the broader ethical implications of their work (Authors, 2013, 2014).

The narrative approach we have adopted recognizes that "stories are powerful tools in learning, because they are one of the most fundamental ways to order experiences and events" (Abma, 2000, p. 226). The contemporary university experience is increasingly fragmented, with students – particularly those from LSES backgrounds – spending less time on campus as they juggle many responsibilities, among which their study is only one. In this environment, narrative becomes particularly valuable to connect the range of disparate interactions students have with a university, and to give them a broader meaning, while "maintaining a sense of continuity" (Gola, 2009, p. 337). Narrative is also a natural choice given our disciplinary backgrounds; the telling of stories is grounded in our everyday practice as media practitioners and teachers, it connects to students' training as professional 'storytellers' and enables them to contextualize their own experience as part of a broader narrative framework.

As educators as well as researchers, our work is informed by action research methodology (Kemmis, 2007; Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993) allowing us to reflexively study our own institutional setting. We used iterative, reflexive and inclusive research methods to engage staff in our school in the development of our Narrative Model through a series of workshops, presentations and informal gatherings. We sought their input and feedback to finesse the model and to develop suggested initiatives for its implementation. Once we had developed a reasonably strong version of the model to present to students for feedback, we began the process of testing its logic with undergraduate and honors students in our school via a series of focus groups.

Our project has been rolled out following the logic of this model so that our first year of pilot initiatives in 2012 focused on improving the first-year experience. Key strategies here included building connections among cohorts, supporting the transition to a new academic and social environment, more clearly signposting key academic and disciplinary literacies, supporting opportunities for the celebration of key milestones, and improving students' sense of belonging to

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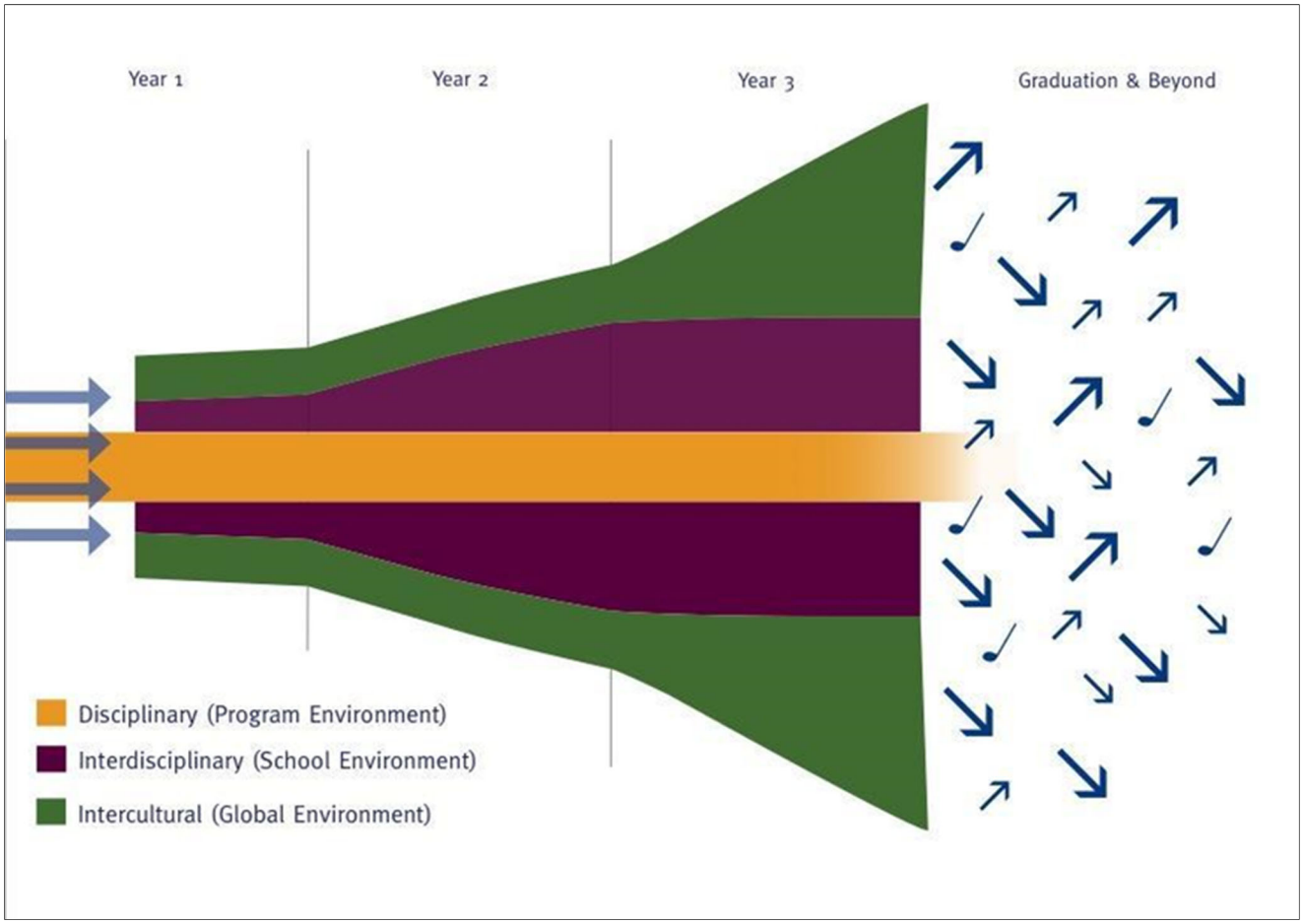

Figure 1. **The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement**

the School as a whole. But before we could begin scoping, piloting and implementing our initiatives as part of our model, we needed to ensure we understood the student experience as it was. To achieve this, we undertook a series of focus groups with students in our School and collected a rich array of qualitative observations on the student experience, including direct feedback on student spaces, as we outline further below.

Student Engagement and Belonging in the HE Environment

Student engagement and belonging remain prominent concerns in the Australian HE sectors particularly in relation to the participation of previously marginalized groups, including students from LSES, international and other diversity backgrounds. It is possible to benchmark local rates of participation against the progress of other OECD countries. In Australia, enrolment rates of 20-29-years-olds are higher than the OECD average, coming in seventh (OECD, 2017). Overall, Australia reported participation rates of approximately close to 40-50% in tertiary education by both 25-34-year-olds and 25-65 year-olds – with greater participation by the former. However, this still leaves Australia behind ten other OECD countries for the participation of these two groups.

Our project aims to improve the participation in HE of Australians from all age groups, and particularly those from LSES backgrounds. Research on the experience of students from diverse backgrounds, and particularly those from LSES backgrounds, suggests that they require different forms of support to the 'traditional' university student, by which we mean the largely domestic (or local) cohorts from upper socioeconomic status backgrounds (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012, p.8). For students from LSES backgrounds, the culture of a university can be "foreign and at times alienating and uninviting" (Krause, 2005, p. 9). James et al. report that these students "have less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education" and have been found to "experience alienation from the cultures of universities" (James, Anderson, Bexley, Devlin, Garnett, Marginson, & Maxwell, 2008, p. 3). A sense of

belonging can be vital in ensuring these students persist and succeed at university (James, 2001).

Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, and McKay (2012) make a case for discarding the two prominent 'deficit' conceptions when it comes to accommodating students from LSES backgrounds. These dominant conceptions tend to take two clear forms. The first proposes that the students themselves are the problem, not coming armed with the necessary social capital to participate successfully in higher education. The second suggests that institutions are the problem for failing to make adequately clear the expectations they have of students. But Devlin et al. (2012) reject both these frameworks for not sufficiently considering the full range of factors that encompass the student experience. Instead, the authors propose a conceptual framework of "socio-cultural incongruence", removing the blame from either party, arguing instead that both sides need to work to identify, understand and negotiate the "particular socio-cultural discourses, tacit expectations and norms of higher education" (p. 2). They advocate an approach that aims to bridge the incongruity that exists between institutions and students through the provision of an empathetic institutional context, which includes spaces for students to meet and study. The authors argue:

> Institutional leaders need to recognize the importance of students having comfortable spaces and places to meet and work with other students. They also need to ensure appropriate spaces within departments/faculties as well as in more informal areas are accessible to students. (Devlin et al., 2012, p. 45)

The thoughtful design and availability of such spaces contributes to the inclusiveness of the campus. Devlin et al. reported that particularly for LSES students who live far from campus, an inclusive space that caters for a range of uses provides a sense of belonging to the institution and can ensure students feel valued by the institution.

Space, Place and Belonging

As discussion of inclusive teaching and changing teaching models brings the spatial dimension of education to the foreground, there is value in careful consideration of the concept of space and its impact on the student experience. Judson (2006) makes the distinction between space as the "physical spatial dimensions and attributes", and place as "those spaces which are meaningful to individuals and to which they attach a sense of belonging" (p. 230). While space is often overlooked in the study of curriculum, Judson points instead to curriculum's highly relational, contextual and social nature. Similarly, Kolb and Kolb (2005) argue that learning is always situated within communities of practice that have "a history, norms, tools, and traditions of practice" to which members are socialized and progress, through mentorship within the community, from novice to expert (p. 200). According to Woolner, Hall, Higgins, McCaughey, and Wall (2007) learning environments involve complex contextual relations of the physical and social and are thus difficult to make causal claims about.

Nonetheless, the design of student spaces, in particular those that are flexible in their conceptualization of learning across both formal and informal curriculum, is a key theme. For instance, Jamieson, Fisher, Gilding, Taylor, and Trevitt (2000) recommend that on-campus learning spaces have a flexible and versatile design, in a manner that integrates services that are traditionally spatially dispersed across campus (such as study spaces and food facilities), and which maximize user control for both students and teachers. Jamieson (2003) makes a case for the creation of adaptable spaces that allow for individual and group as well as formal and informal learning. He argues that as the value of collaborative knowledge grows, "university campuses will need to provide spaces that facilitate the formation of communities of common interest and enable greater communication, interaction and collaboration" (2003, p. 122). Similarly, Webb, Schaller and Hunley (2008) argue that there is a "growing awareness that learning happens all over campus, not just in classrooms and labs" (p. 408).

Oblinger makes explicit the link between the student experience and the design of learning space, arguing that, "learning spaces convey an image of the institution's philosophy about teaching and learning" (p. 14). She argues that the "notion of a classroom has expanded and evolved; the space need no longer be defined by 'the class' but by 'learning'" (p.14), and that this learning is an "active, collaborative, and social process that hinges on people" (p. 17). Learning spaces need to be designed with an understanding of how they will be used by students on the spectrum from isolated to collaborative study (Bennett 2016). But providing students with a convenient, comfortable and *quiet* place to study (the key requirements of spaces that encourage productivity) does not necessarily mean providing a *silent* or *anti-social* space, but a social space within which they are able to focus on study. Supporting the existence of social learning spaces, Lomas and Oblinger (2006) argue that, "spaces that catalyze social interaction, serendipitous meetings, and impromptu conversations contribute to personal and professional growth" (5.6). Indeed, Webb, Schaller and Hunley (2008) found that students reported greater engagement with activities when they were able to work in a space with friends. Matthews, Andrews and Adams (2011) document the introduction of what they call an "informal social learning space (SLS)" in the science faculty at the University of Queensland. They

define SLS as "purpose-built, informal physical spaces…[which] act as a medium through which the social and academic aspects of university life can coincide" (p. 107). The authors argue that the availability of this sort of space is particularly important to support first year transition by providing a space to form social networks within cohorts.

Montgomery (2008) suggests, however, that when it comes to learning spaces the literature is leaving the profession behind and that the issue is just as much how to engage dynamically with existing, static spaces with a low investment as how to redesign costly new spaces. Another key observation is that staff and student users are rarely involved in space (re)developments (Jamieson, Fisher, Gilding, Taylor & Trevitt, 2000; Woolner et al., 2007). At the University of Michigan, the development of two new learning spaces – one formal, one informal – as part of a larger development, The North Quadrangle Residential and Academic Complex, emphasised the importance of user engagement in the development and use of the space (Lausch Vander Broek, Alexander, & Riegle, 2013). The University appointed staff members as both programming and technology coordinators to guide and enable staff and students in the use of the spaces.

Finally, the focus group data confirmed that much of the informal student experience occurs not in physical spaces but online, whether through existing networks such as Facebook and Twitter, or through various tools sanctioned by universities to support the classroom learning experience (e.g. Blackboard, Canvas). Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009) argue that for students, "online and offline worlds are clearly co-existing but used in different ways for developing and sustaining different types of relationships" (p.145). However, for this study we have limited our investigation to the physical spaces made available and used by students.

Space and Belonging: The Student Perspective

As part of the process of testing our Belonging Narrative Model we conducted a series of one-hour focus groups with students in our School. Participants were recruited in-class and via an all-of-School email drive, with movie vouchers and a catered session offered as an incentive. A total of 16 sessions with 74 students was run with every program in the School represented. Students were assured that their participation was voluntary and not linked to their assessment and were given the option to remain anonymous and to withdraw their participation and data at any time. Participants were assigned to sessions according to year level, with separate sessions for international students to ensure they felt comfortable to express themselves among their peers. The focus groups generated two forms of data: audio transcripts and informal 'worksheets'. In our analysis we were guided by Massey's (2010) analytical framework, sorting responses into articulated, attributional and emergent data sets.

We asked participants about their use of spaces on and off campus and probed directly about their use of the Atelier. While the existing Atelier space had provisions for students including lockers, tables and chairs, power points and a small kitchenette, its decorations had been kept minimal, so the space appeared sterile and cavernous, and was often empty. Asked whether they use the space, students confirmed our suspicions, as this exchange demonstrates:

> Interviewer: "Do you ever use the Atelier space down on level two?"
> Participant: "The what?"

This wasn't simply a problem of naming; many students we questioned didn't know about the Atelier or were unsure whether they were allowed to use it. Those that did use it described it as "cold", "sterile" and "a waste of space". A number of students compared the Atelier to another informal student space belonging solely to the students in the Games Program, which was a popular space for socializing, group work, eating meals, and just 'hanging out' between and after classes for students in that discipline. Importantly, Games students viewed that room as their own. Commenting on the sparse décor of the Atelier, students in our focus groups said they would appreciate a more inviting space, one they could feel a sense of ownership over. As one student remarked, the space would be in higher demand "if it was a good lounge with actual couches and not just geometric boxes".

The focus group data also demonstrated that many students did not see the Atelier as a space to use between classes. While the School is surrounded by the amenities a Central Business District offers, our city campus lacks many of the large, communal spaces and services that keep students on-campus before, between, or after classes. As one student told us, when facing a large break between scheduled classes: "it's such a big gap I either turn around and go back home or I work in the library". When questioned about the library, students informed us that it fulfils the need for a quiet work space, but not, on the whole, a place for group work, eating or just relaxing between classes. This observation echoes the work of Webb, Schaller and Hunley (2008) who, in their study of the University of Dayton library, report that, "students do not view the library as a place that supports group interaction" (p. 419). Students did tell us that a number of spaces in the University were used for these purposes, namely a recently opened café used by staff, students and external patrons; as well as a number of outdoor spaces, and empty classrooms in the main School

building. A number of participants reported using a 'pop-up' space in a nearby shopping centre rather than any on-campus spaces for study, group-work or relaxation. While these spaces allow students to convene with their existing program peers in or around the University, they do not facilitate the sense of School-based belonging or cross-year and cross-program interaction as could, we envisaged, a refurbished Atelier.

While some students commented that they did not see this sort of provision as necessary to their success – one student commented: "I'm pretty much here just to get my degree and get out, I know that sounds really harsh" – we also knew from the broader responses of the focus groups that for most students the transition to university remains a difficult one (see for example: Kift, 2008; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Devlin et al., 2012). We found that our students, often much to their own surprise, require the assistance of teaching staff to make social connections with their cohort peers. The majority of our first-year participants also reported a range of anxieties around the transition to a new academic environment, expressing concern at the sudden lack of contact with teaching staff (compared to their high school experience), less time for brainstorming in class, and fewer opportunities to present 'drafts' to their teachers (meaning less guidance on assessment tasks).

Despite evidence of some cliques and competitive behavior in a few key program cohorts, most programs successfully used a range of techniques such as group work within the classroom to foster a sense of belonging within each year-level program cohort. Nonetheless, students from nearly all programs reported that they would like a deeper sense of connection to senior peers from within their program (whether in the form of mentorships, or less formally), and particularly, to students in other programs. For students in creative or studio-based disciplines (such as design, photography, sound design, games and animation) these sorts of connections were seen as the first step towards collaborations that would mimic their real-world professional experience, and an important part of preparing them for the workplace.

Based on these findings, we believed that it was necessary to create a space belonging to students for the range of informal activities they engage in on campus including: private study, group work, socializing, preparing meals and running a range of cohort events, including student-led exhibitions and industry events. The Atelier provided the perfect location: as an existing space it was a low-cost option with great potential for refurbishment. We proposed that the Atelier would become a cultural hub of the School, a place where students could connect with staff and other University services, rather than be a 'rumpus room' solely for student use. Students would be engaged in the refurbishment processes as co-creators, providing feedback and recommendations, and, where appropriate, assisting with the redesign. The room's fittings were conceived of as temporary and to appear 'rough and ready'. This was in part due to a University's Property Services' constraint on the project that any refurbishments needed to be removable, but also to allow students to feel a sense of ownership over the finishing touches and evolve the space to their needs. Essential amenities included a kitchenette (microwave, sink, hot water tap), vending machines, lockers and adequate power points for laptops. Data from the focus groups as well as from existing studies (such as Webb, Schaller, & Hunley, 2008; and Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011) confirmed that tables and chairs needed to be comfortable, light, and in configurations adaptable to a range of needs. Designing for multiple 'zones' would allow for a range of uses, with the provision of some larger tables to encourage informal social interactions. While we are still tracking data that will illuminate impacts on engagement, we can report back on the co-creation process as well as changes in student use and feedback on the space.

Co-Creating a Student Space: Process and Outcomes

In January 2012 we began refurbishments, working with a co-creation methodology alongside former and current RMIT students. In line with Devlin et al., (2012) we advocate an approach that aims to bridge the incongruity that exists between institutions and students through the provision of an empathetic institutional context, which includes spaces for students to meet and study. Furthermore, a co-creation approach recognizes that students actively co-create their university experience and should be genuinely engaged in processes and decisions that involve them, by providing feedback, and, where appropriate, creative input in the change processes. This approach recognizes that in the contemporary HE environment, students are no longer passive consumers but rather co-creators of their HE experience, as institutions are being reimagined as service providers, spaces where value is co-created by consumers within complex frameworks of actors and resources (Karpen, Hall, Katsoulidis, and Cam, 2011).

To this end, we employed a graduate of RMIT's Interior Design program to prepare a temporary design for the interior that would respond to feedback from students, but at low cost and within a tight time frame. We also employed three final-year Bachelor of Communication Design students to design a visual identity and branding for the space, as well as to add some design finishes to walls and table tops. Students responded well to the deliberately 'unfinished' nature of the space, by, for example, filling noticeboards with flyers for student events, and by designating informally different spaces within the room for different purposes – one

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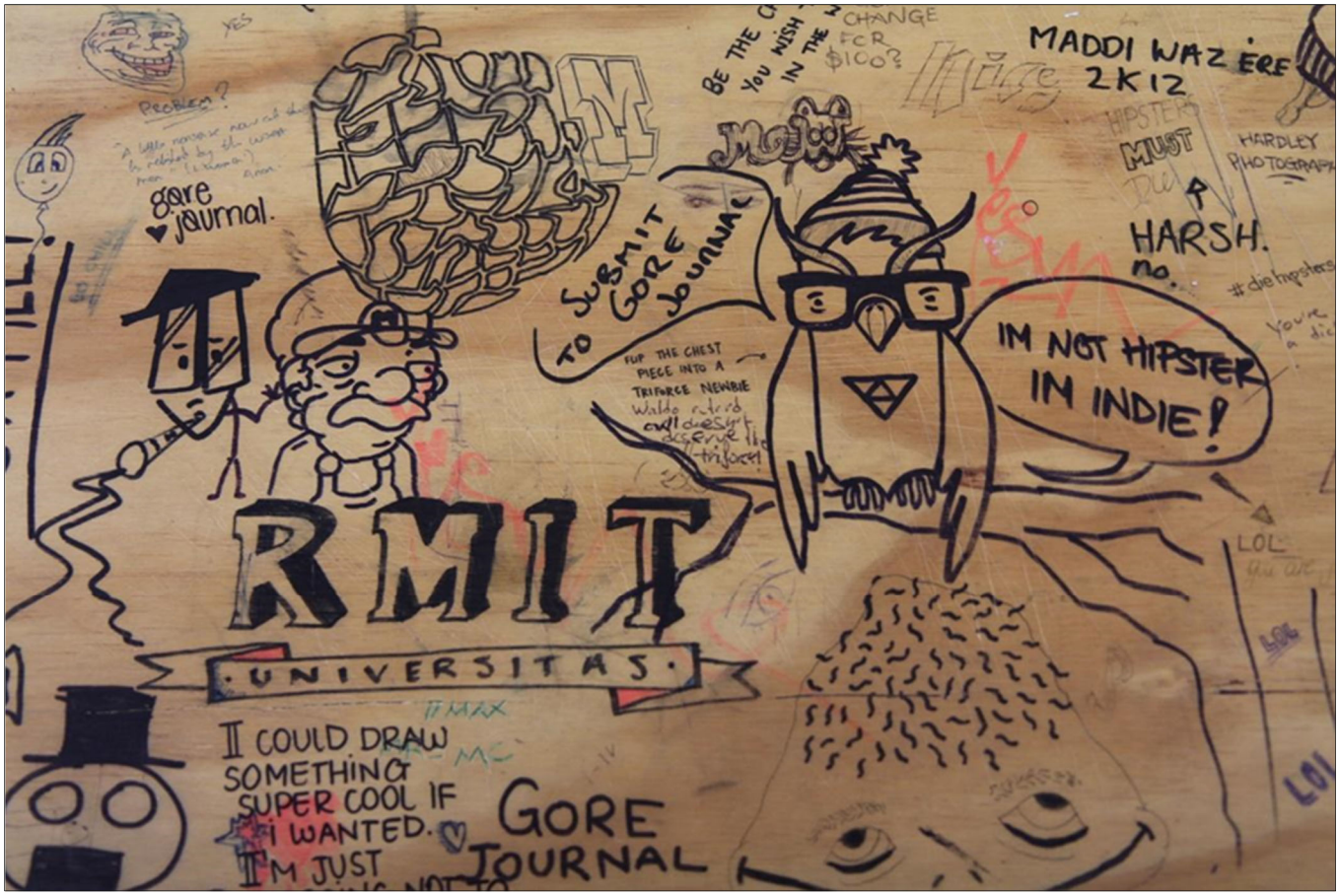

Figure 2. **Customized Table Top Segment from the Student Atelier**

large table in the kitchenette became a more communal space to chat and eat, as well as for selling tickets to student social events, while a smaller alcove, curtained off from the main area, evolved into a quieter study space. Our design students made chipboard tops for the tables in the space and added a few designs and doodles of their own to encourage other students to use them in a similar way. Figure 2 shows a portion of one table top that has been customized by students, including an unofficial RMIT logo, alongside invitations for students to submit to the student-run Gore Journal, as well as ruminations on hipster stereotypes.

Completion of the refurbishment, however, took longer than anticipated and gaining the necessary approvals from our University's Property Services was a drawn-out process. This bureaucratic challenge reinforced the need for us to embed transition priorities as core business across all areas of the University, in keeping with Kift's holistic principle of FYE culture as "in rhetoric and reality, 'everyone's business'" (2008, p. 2). Notwithstanding this delay, the student response to the refurbishment was overwhelmingly positive. We first spoke to students about the redesign during Orientation Week in March 2012 – through informal one-on-one and small group interviews to camera in the space – about midway through refurbishments. Despite the space still carrying vestiges of its original stark white design, students were positive about the first steps towards refurbishment, as this students' feedback indicates: "I think it's transformed amazingly. It's a huge improvement on what it used to be". Another student commented: "there's a lot more life to it – it was just this big white quiet room before, and now, I don't know, there's a lot more possibilities". However, students recognized that there was more to be done. They wanted more color, graphics and wall decorations: "I think it'll look cool when everyone starts adding their own touch to it, that'll make it look a bit more full. It's a bit bare at the moment". They also wanted more tables and chairs and urged caution in allowing the design to overwhelm the purpose of the space, suggesting that we "don't go overboard" decorating the space with plants to always ensure it is primarily a functional workspace.

Our research team returned to the Atelier again in September 2012, once the first stage refurbishment was complete (see Figure 3), to further evaluate the initiative. Again, we approached students who were using the space at

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Figure 3. **The Refurbished Student Atelier**

the time for informal one-on-one or small group interviews. A number of students reported finding out about the space at orientation, others through word of mouth. "It is fairly spoken about" one student told us, while many international students said that they were introduced to the space through student peers – suggesting that it is fulfilling the need for a space that supports transition to a new and unfamiliar physical as well as academic environment. By providing a space that can be a 'home base', students can have a physical space that better emulates their high school experience, thus easing their transition to the HE environment.

Students liked the DIY feel of the finishes, and the fact that they could write on the tabletops as they pleased: "what drew me towards it was just that people could write all over the tables, just a small little thing like that drew me to it." One student reflected that this made the room feel more lived in than it had previously: "it's a bit homelier when things have graffiti on them. I love the fact that we can draw on these things". Students also suggested that the room was fulfilling its aim of encouraging cross-disciplinary links: "everyone just talks to each other and everyone's just got the same kind of interests – it's a lot more vibrant". The co-creation process of the refurbishment was also successful, with one student reporting that: "coming in here is quite communal, it feels like it's the students', like we own this place." But students said they still needed more tables and chairs, more lockers, and commented that space is often at a premium, particularly for group work scenarios. Student comments suggest that the Atelier now fills a gap between the formality of the library and the informality of public space: "having a space that's not the library, that we can come to and be as loud as we like and do our group work is really important and integral to us succeeding". This evidence aligns with that from Matthews, et al. (2011), who report that students see the informal SLS that they documented as a more social study environment, not used for 'serious' learning like the library, but a place that is informal, social but still linked to their coursework and cohorts.

We have continued to track and evaluate student use and responses to the Atelier into the second, third, and fourth years of its use. In informal one-on-one interviews in the space, students have confirmed that it is functioning successfully as a multidisciplinary space for a range of activities. But, as this student reflects, it is also successful in

beginning to bridge connections across cohorts and disciplines:

> Oh the [Student Atelier] … has been awesome just because it's a nice place to be. I don't know that I've necessarily made friends because I've done things there, but you can have a chat to people. One thing I've found that's been kind of fun is… it's kind of like stepping back from the canvas like you've sort of got to go like, "Okay, I'm looking at it this way, but how does someone who knows nothing about it see it?" So, sometimes I'll be the weird kid who turns the computer and says, "Excuse me. Can you tell me what you think of this?" Just from someone who's got a different perspective.

The space has been used by students and staff within the School as well as external stakeholders for a range of purposes, including: by students for fundraisers for their own projects; for exhibitions of graduate work and student 'open mic' nights; by RMIT's International and Development branch, who coordinate international student exchange across the University, for a student photography competition; by RMIT Property Services to provide evidence and feedback to guide and support further refurbishments in the building; and by RMIT Equity and Diversity as a space to conduct tertiary engagement workshops with high school students. But perhaps the most powerful feedback are the tabletops themselves, which have become so covered in student 'doodles' and designs that they have required sanding back to make room for new contributions.

Nonetheless engaging students from across the geographically dispersed range of degrees in the School remains a challenge. On the one hand, evidence from Student-Staff Consultative Committees (SSCCs) minutes suggested that students in some programs love the space but feel like external students are using it and making it too busy. This suggests that another informal student space is needed, which was confirmed by other program cohorts who also express through their SSCCs the desire for a space of 'their own'. On the other hand, students in a program based in an adjoining building said that they are still not using the space as they are either unaware of it or still feel too intimidated – suggesting that greater work needs to be done at transition to the School to ensure they feel 'at home' there. These same students also expressed a desire to meet more students in different programs within the School, which points to the challenges of communicating with the large and diverse student cohort within this multi-sited School.

Conclusions

The Belonging Project Narrative Model positions students not as passive consumers but rather as co-creators of their university experience, recognizing the way in which universities are being reimagined as service providers, spaces where value is co-created by consumers within complex frameworks of actors and resources (Karpen, Hall, Katsoulidis & Cam 2011). In this environment, producers are reconfiguring their relations with consumers, away from the traditional industrial consumer-production relationship. Engaging students in change empowers them as co-creators and ensures more sustainable solutions.

> What may once have been considered deviant behavior can now be viewed as a sign that students find libraries as desirable spaces. By putting their feet on the furniture, talking and listening, and eating, students show that they have "moved in" and become comfortable in a space. (p. 419).

Our experience with the Atelier reflects these findings. While we knew students were struggling with the transition to university, we also knew that this wasn't entirely due to a lack of support within the formal curriculum. Certainly, The Belonging Project's full suite of first-year initiatives[1] was working to support and extend other initiatives by the University. However, we had learnt that students lacked a space that could provide them with the broad social experience that they were used to at high school and expected from a university campus. Indeed, the sense of a university experience that is shared in space and time is something that is threatened not only by the nature of a fragmented city campus, but also more generally as the university experience increasingly moves online.

By refurbishing an existing but underused student space in response to student feedback, and through a process of genuine co-creation with students, we have demonstrated a low-cost but highly visible way to immediately improve the overall student experience. Working at the school or faculty level, such an initiative can facilitate the cross-program and cross-year connections that students crave as part of their on-campus HE experiences.

As an outcome of our project, we issued a series of formal recommendations to our School's Learning and Teaching Committee. These included: (a) that the physical

[1] See http://www.rmit.edu.au/mediacommunication/belonging-project

environment of a school should include informal student spaces to encourage a sense of belonging, as well as interdisciplinary and cross-year collaborations; and (b) that the design of these spaces is undertaken using a process of co-creation, making use of student feedback, and engaging students in the redesign where possible. These recommendations are applicable to other institutions seeking to better extend and support the informal learning environment of the student experience. But while an inviting and accessible informal SLS can play a significant role in assisting the student transition process, it will not achieve this by itself. We argue that it is essential to develop a strategy for engaging students in such spaces, promoting the purposeful use of the spaces for key transition and cohort activities. Students need to be aware of informal SLS, feel invited to use them for a range of activities, and feel a sense of ownership over their development and use.

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