Belinda Tynan · Tricia McLaughlin ·
Andrea Chester · Catherine Hall-van den Elsen ·
Belinda Kennedy   *Editors*

Transformations in Tertiary Education

The Scholarship of Engagement at RMIT University

Springer

Transformations in Tertiary Education

Belinda Tynan · Tricia McLaughlin ·
Andrea Chester · Catherine Hall-van den Elsen ·
Belinda Kennedy
Editors

Transformations in Tertiary Education

The Scholarship of Engagement at RMIT
University

🜚 Springer

Editors
Belinda Tynan
RMIT University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Andrea Chester
RMIT University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Belinda Kennedy
RMIT University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Tricia McLaughlin
RMIT University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Catherine Hall-van den Elsen
RMIT University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Preface

It is my pleasure to write this foreword for what I believe is an exciting volume filled with cases of how our educational practitioners go about scholarly practice at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University).

Transformations in Tertiary Education: the scholarship of engagement at RMIT University showcases a range of practices that were explored at the RMIT Learning and Teaching conference, held in Melbourne on October 16–17, 2018. This annual conference brings together a community of scholars, practitioners and sector innovators, who actively contribute their ideas, enthusiasm and passion to support RMIT's journey towards scholarship and the promotion of remarkable, contemporary learning experiences for our students. This collection is the result of an enthusiasm by the conference participants to submit their work for peer review and to make their practice more available to a wider community.

Working in a large and complex educational institution, RMIT staff have the responsibility of facilitating transformational experiences for over 80,000 students globally, across vocational and higher education sectors, preparing them for life and work. Our graduates need to be able to meet the challenges presented by rapid and radical shifts in the work they do; where and how they work; the skills and competencies they need and the industries and markets to which they contribute. The responsibility to be active contributors in a dynamic and complex world is vast.

As the demands upon graduates become more complex, so too do the challenges faced by academics and teachers. The 2018 conference streams reflected these challenges, providing a rare opportunity for participants and presenters to network and reflect around scholarship and innovative teaching and learning in a global tertiary education setting. The chapter authors from RMIT Australia and our offshore campuses in Vietnam address compelling questions related to curriculum, technology, assessment, and work-readiness and interrogate them from twenty-first-century global perspectives.

This book is designed by RMIT's (FOR) 1300 Club for dissemination to an audience beyond the university. It presents innovative ideas about new directions in tertiary education, representing the breadth and depth of teaching and learning at RMIT. All chapter submissions underwent a double-blind peer review process, and

it is with pride that I present the works here in three discrete sections. In each section, the authors have demonstrated how they develop and sustain practice around the three focus areas. In *Engaging for Belonging*, six chapters examine transformative student experiences that address how we create remarkable student learning experiences, underwritten by scholarship and evidence. In *Engaging for a Global Outlook*, six chapters showcase examples of a focus on expanding our global networks through curriculum and extracurricular activities that develop intercultural awareness and competence and in *Engaging for Life and Work*, five chapters discuss innovative curricula and assessments that ensure that every one of our students leaves RMIT with skills that can be applied to changing workforce needs.

Scholars and practitioners will find that this volume focusses on the complex interrelationships between scholarship and practice, innovative learning design and learning outcomes and the shifting scholarship roles of the institution, the teacher and the learner. This book value-adds to both national and international perspectives on scholarship, promoting new interest in changing approaches to learning and teaching across the tertiary sector.

I do hope you enjoy reading and disseminating this work to your colleagues and friends.

Melbourne, Australia   Professor Belinda Tynan
                                             Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President
                                                                      RMIT University

Acknowledgements

In 2018, RMIT University hosted one of the largest annual learning and teaching conferences in its history. Six conference streams covered the university's strategic focus areas, and each stream saw academics, teachers and invited guests presenting in various types of sessions. More than 600 participants had the opportunity to hear about their peers' great teaching practices across a range of academic disciplines.

RMIT's 1300 Club was actively involved in the conference, and after the conference, club members realized that contributors had provided valuable snapshots of innovative teaching practice. The 1300 Club developed an ambitious plan to publish an edited volume to showcase current endeavours dedicated to the scholarship of learning and teaching at RMIT University.

With the support of Professor Belinda Tynan, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), Professor Sherman Young, Associate Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) and Professor Andrea Chester, Dean, School of Education, the 1300 Club is pleased to present this book on the anniversary of the 2018 conference.

The editors especially thank the academics who gave their time to participate in the double-blind peer review process. Their thoughtful and constructive contributions helped the authors to refine their chapters:

Neda Abbasi, Central Queensland University
Helen Anderton, RMIT University
Tasos Barkatsas, RMIT University
Amanda Berry, Monash University
Jeffrey Brooks, RMIT University
Bronwyn Clarke, RMIT University
Peter Davis, University of Newcastle
Heather Fehring, RMIT University
David Forrest, RMIT University
Roger Hadgraft, University of Technology, Sydney
Cathy Hall-van den Elsen, RMIT University
Graham Hardy, University of South Australia
Belinda Kennedy, RMIT University

Contents

About the Editors

Professor Belinda Tynan is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), RMIT University. Professor Tynan has responsibility for the quality and overall design of academic programs, student administration and services, academic performance (including promotion); updating of the teaching pedagogy, delivery mechanisms and learning resources; and student access and equity. Her research is within the field of online and digital education with a keen interest in 'openness', staff workload and more recently learning analytics. Prof. Tynan has worked across a range of education sectors for 30 years in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK. As a member of the Vice-Chancellor's Executive at RMIT, she actively contributes to RMIT strategic planning, in particular, education and student services.

Tricia McLaughlin is a nationally recognized scholar in the area of lifelong learning. Tricia has extensive experience in the development of lifelong learning principles and their application in workplaces, educational settings and schools. The primary focus of her work is around learning and teaching models; and the evaluation of impact, particularly in the teaching of STEM. Tricia has authored and edited 5 books and numerous publications in learning and teaching and her discipline of construction.

Professor Andrea Chester is currently the Dean, School of Education at RMIT University. An accomplished senior academic and executive with 20+ years' experience in tertiary education, Andrea has led learning and teaching innovation at local and national levels She has particular expertise in the development of partnerships to enhance learning, with experience in co-design and mentoring models. Andrea is a member of the Australian Council of Deans of Education and has been recognized nationally for her teaching excellence. She is the author of more than 100 publications, reports and conferences papers.

Dr. Cathy Hall-van den Elsen has extensive experience in tertiary learning and teaching. The primary focus of her work has been around developing models and professional development for transnational learning and teaching and addressing the

challenges and opportunities for academic and teaching staff moving from traditional classrooms to 'new-generation' learning spaces. Cathy has participated in national projects associated with professional development for transnational teaching teams and the assurance of learning in higher education. Cathy convened RMIT University's 2018 learning and teaching conference, Transformations in Tertiary Education.

Dr. Belinda Kennedy is an academic in the School of Education and in the College of Science, Engineering and Health at RMIT University. Belinda has broad experience in STEM disciplines, in particular, science and has initiated a number of STEM learning approaches for on-campus and off-campus programs for students at all year levels.

Part I
Engaging for Belonging

Chapter 1
Engaging for Belonging

Gabrielle Murray, Rachel Wilson and Bronwyn Clarke

Section Overview

A shifting political and technological landscape combined with increased competition and financial pressure have reshaped the way higher education institutions fulfil their core business of education, collaboration, research and service. Evolving models of online learning have fuelled international competition, while the changing technological environment in which universities operate, provides students with myriad social networking sites in which to extend the informal curriculum. In Australia, an increasing intake of international students, quotas for the inclusion of more diverse cohorts, and changes to government policy and funding are placing new demands on higher education institutions (Australian Government, 2017; Koziol, 2018). As universities contend with the challenge of engaging students in this changing environment, a positive outcome has been a renewed focus on the student experience, including how to enhance student engagement and foster a sense of belonging between cohort peers, staff, and institutions (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spence, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn, Bie, Dorime-Williams, & Williams, 2016; Thomas, 2012; Morieson, Carlin, Clarke, Lukas, & Wilson, 2013; Araújo, Carlin, Clarke, Morieson, Lukas, & Wilson, 2014; Araujo, Wilson & Clarke, 2015; Ribera, Miller, & Dumford, 2017).

Belonging first came to prominence as a concept within the field of psychology when it appeared in the third tier, alongside love, in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. In psychology, 'belongingness' is therefore most often defined as a basic human need, recognised as fundamental to human motivation and behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Central to the conception of belonging has been Baumeister and Leary's (1995, p. 497) hypothesis that human beings are driven

G. Murray (✉) · R. Wilson · B. Clarke
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: gabrielle.murray@rmit.edu.au

to form 'at least a minimum quality of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships'. The failure to belong or to make human connections is associated with a failure to thrive, consequently leading to feelings of 'isolation, alienation, and loneliness' (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi & Cummins, 2008, p. 213). Extensive research has demonstrated that the concept of belonging is highly applicable to tertiary education, and work within RMIT University, and the sector more broadly, has identified that fostering students' sense of belonging improves transition and retention, learning outcomes, engagement, well-being and organizational advocacy. (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spence, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn et al., 2016; Thomas, 2012; Wilson, Murray, & Clarke, 2018a, b).

In the higher education sector in Australia, belonging has been linked to research on the first-year experience (FYE) and first-year retention. Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) identified belonging as one of the three principles driving Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) innovative, university-wide approach for the FYE. Kift et al. (2010) cited the work of Krause (2005) as influential to their approach to student engagement. Krause analysed the FYE for students by asking: 'what is the evidence of engagement?' Accordingly, there are five elements that are readily evidenced, including engaging through: class contact and study, online, peers, academic staff, and with the institution (Krause, 2005, p. 5). Similarly, Kift et al. (2010, p. 4) argued the 'first year curriculum must engage new learners in their learning and mediate support for that learning'. To do this requires awareness and access to support services and the development of 'a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experiences' (Kift et al., 2010, p. 4).

Most approaches to belonging in higher education have addressed vulnerable student cohorts, often based on ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or first-year transitioning status (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2016). Released at the end of 2017, the RMIT Belonging Strategy outlines a set of goals and interventions to activate belonging across the whole student life cycle and beyond, while aligning and coordinating existing and new initiatives to ensure that changes to the organisation are sustainable. Thomas (2012) and Strayhorn's (2012) examination of belonging within higher education has informed how researchers at RMIT has situated an ethos of belonging within a whole-of-institution strategy (Wilson, Murray, & Clark, 2018a; b). Furthermore, RMIT University's 2015–2020 strategic plan, *Ready for work and life,* identified belonging as a key focus area, providing the ideal background for the development of a strategy that encompasses an organisational framework to inspire, motivate, coordinate and align goals, activities and improvements to ensure sustainability.

Prior to the enterprise-wide 2017 Belonging Strategy work on activating a sense of belonging had taken place in the School of Media and Communication, through the Belonging Project 2011–2015 (Wilson & Clarke, 2016), a multidisciplinary learning and teaching research study that defined a new approach to enhancing student engagement and graduate outcomes. The purpose of the project was to demonstrate how an ethos of belonging could be embedded in formal and informal curriculum

activities. The project built confidence and capacity for students in disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and global learning environments across the student life cycle by using a narrative model aligned to the 3-year bachelor degree structure, fostering students' sense of identity and engagement (Clarke & Wilson, 2016).

In relation to other Australian universities, RMIT University is one of the best performers when it comes to retention rates (Australian Government, 2017). Once students enrol, they generally stay. Since 2016, the university has been using pulse data to capture up-to-date student sentiment. Although students stay at the university once they are enrolled, it has become apparent they are not necessarily enjoying their experience or feeling engaged with the university. The RMIT Belonging Strategy seeks to measure and affect students sense of belonging at the different stages of the student journey, with the belonging drivers informing perception of what a good experience of engagement should look and feel like at RMIT University (for further discussion of the strategy, see Wilson, Murray, & Clarke, 2018a). These drivers are all factors over which the university can have some degree of influence, and it is through the lens of these drivers that educators seek to measure and affect student engagement.

Unsurprisingly, the RMIT Belonging Strategy identified 'learning environments' as the primary site at which students' sense of belonging can be activated. In 2018, the focus of the researchers' work was to introduce the strategy to teaching staff in the colleges, schools and programs. To build trust in the benefit of adopting a belonging ethos in curriculum design amongst grassroots staff, a range of interconnected activities were undertaken including: program belonging workshops, curriculum-specific belonging initiatives (CSBIs), the introduction of school-based belonging action plans, the recruitment of school-based belonging champions and the development of staff focussed micro-credentials. The focus has been on the development of program and course-specific belonging narratives (and actions) unique to discipline students and staff.

The inclusion of the belonging stream at the *Transformations in Tertiary Education* learning and teaching conference was one of the significant outcomes of the RMIT Belonging Strategy. The conference stream showcased a range of innovative work been undertaken to embedded belonging in the curriculum by passionate and engaged grassroots educators. As outlined in this section introduction (Engaging for Belonging), the notion of belonging within an educational context is complex and often discipline specific. Each of the case studies presented in this section illustrates a way in which the authors have interpreted the task of creating a sense of belonging for their student cohorts. Each chapter engages with the concept and the literature of belonging in different ways and demonstrates the strength and adaptability of the concept. The chapters presented discuss the concept of belonging through case studies ranging from specific work integrated learning (WIL) experiences for Vocational Education; youth work students in community building; embedding academic skills from a disciplinary perspective; co-learner experiences of students in and out of prison; and how peer-to-peer learning for staff and students can act as a significant contributor to a sense of belonging within tertiary education. The rich material will be a fruitful resource to educators, offering insights to complex learning and teach-

ing situations, with virtually all of the concepts and ideas presented being readily adaptable across disciplines.

In the chapter 'Partnerships for Learning and Belonging in Tertiary Education: A social capital analysis', the authors Chester, Johnson and Clarke return to broader concerns within tertiary education with an examination of the relationship of peer partnerships and belonging through the framework of social capital. Student peer-to-peer mentoring forms a significant part of RMIT's activation of belonging and this chapter provides a rigorous, wide-ranging and unique perspective of the philosophical dimensions of this theoretical approach.

As the authors indicate, academic interest in social capital as an outcome of community engagement gained prominence in the 1990s through the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Social capital is compared to cultural and economic capital and defined it as the product of the value of personal connections an individual has. Similar to definitions of belonging, social capital is developed when connections and ties are reciprocal, involve trust and elicit positive emotions. The authors identify two types of social capital, bonding social capital and linking social capital, as key attributes required to sustain meaningful peer-to-peer learning for both students and staff in the form of staff peer observation.

In their chapter 'Nurturing the Resilient Learner: the role of university and learner'; Holdsworth, Turner and Scott-Young present a framework to help conceptualise contemporary notions of resilience for undergraduate students and outline how its development can be supported throughout the student journey. Defined as the capacity of learners to adapt and develop additional capability in response to adverse situations, academic resilience is a constructive mechanism that can be developed through curriculum and co-curricular activities. The authors point to the critical role a sense of belonging plays in developing resilience for students, especially in terms of self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation and student retention rates.

Rather than being a passive by-product of education, resilience capability training can only occur if the university is positioned as a major contributor in its development, through implicit and explicit actions. Implicit action occurs primarily via formal learning experiences and builds individual resilience capability; explicit action develops through a broader focus on a supportive learning environment for students. The 'Resilience and Higher Education' framework proposed by the authors outlines the ways in which these two approaches are simultaneously required and can be operationalised within a university. Resilience is not something we are born with but can be nurtured and universities have a significant role to play in the development of resilience in students, with its benefits exceeding that of the individual to become culturally and socially far-reaching.

The concept of embedding academic skills within discipline curriculum is now largely considered routine, however, its application across the sector is rarely consistent. In 'Embedding Academic Literacies for Belonging in First Year Criminology', Ryan, McLean, Hamilton, Liston, Stratton and Hiscock report on the work done to insert and develop 'multiple' academic skills in two subjects in the first-year Criminology program. The authors note that while this work is routine in many disciplines, it is relatively new to the discipline of Criminology. The research identifies thematic

insights into discrepancies between student and staff expectations and how to better enable students' skill development through strategies such as feedback loops. The loops incorporate an evaluative process method that enables reflection and active engagement between staff and students.

In 'Youth Ready for Youth Future: A case study of project-based learning in Youth Work', the authors MacKay, Pham and Bayley describe a compelling example of how a compulsory WIL task became a powerful conduit for students to experience a sense of belonging to their discipline, profession and community. In this project, vocational Youth Work students worked with teachers and community partners to co-design an outreach program for 'at risk' or disengaged young people to support the development of employability skills and provide insight into educational pathways. In a mutually beneficial project, the students set up and operated pop-up career advice hubs across a range of locations and provided relevant, targeted and first-hand examples on how to access education and career skills advice. The ongoing project is highly successful and valued by the partner communities, providing authentic learning experiences which ensure that the initiative benefits students, partners and the university.

Similarly, in Martinovic and Liddell's chapter, 'Enhancing diversity and inclusion through students' transformative experiences in prison', demonstrate the importance of actively building a sense of belonging to discipline, community and profession through WIL programs. In this instance, the project is the local adaptation of an internationally recognised prison exchange program, Inside-Out. After a rigorous selection process, a small number of RMIT Criminology and Justice students undertake a university course with prisoners by attending classes at the prison. The data the authors have gathered proves that the program continues to provide significant life-changing transformational learning for both cohorts. The incarcerated participants report expanded world views and greater confidence, whereas the university students report a process of growing awareness of the prisoners as individuals with complex histories and interconnecting disadvantage. All students improve their critical thinking skills and engagement with the teaching materials and 'inside' students generally obtain higher academic results. However, and perhaps most importantly, 'outside' students report an increased awareness of the structures of power and privilege and ability to examine their own stereotypical beliefs as they relate to crime and punishment. In addition, the sense of belonging that is generated by the program extends to 'outside' students reporting increased connection to the community.

Belonging is a complex interpersonal concept that influences the overall student experience and should be a value that drives the 'whole student' experience. There is a financial imperative to improve student belonging, but, more importantly, for both students and staff is the sense of engagement that follows. Having motivated students who are ready to learn and staff impassioned about the generative potential of educational design brings us back to the reason as why many educators teach—to be stimulated by participating in the idea of others and for the joy of engaging in the process of learning that happens in classrooms worldwide.

References

Araújo, N., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Morieson, L., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2014). Belonging in the first year: A creative discipline cohort case study. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 5*(2). Retrieved from https://fyhejournal.com/article/view/240/247/.

Araujo, N., Wilson, R., & Clarke, B. (2015). Why belonging still matters: Student success beyond generic employability skills. In *Proceedings from STARS* (pp. 1–10). www.unistars.org/papers/STARS2015/12C.pdf/.

Australian Government, Department of Education and Training. (2017). *Key findings from the 'Completion Rates of Higher Education Students—Cohort Analysis*, 2005–2015' Report. Retrieved from https://docs.education.gov.au/node/46121.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497.

Clarke, B., & Wilson, R. (2016). *The ethos of belonging: A narrative model approach to student engagement 2011–2015*. Melbourne: School of Media and Communications, RMIT University. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/the-belonging-project/.

Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino College students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education, 70*(4), 324–345.

Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE: A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 1*(1), 1–20.

Koziol, M. (2018, November 12). We are under assault: Major universities go to war with Morrison government over research cuts'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/we-are-under-assault-major-universities-go-to-war-with-morrison-government-over-research-cuts-20181112-p50fih.html.

Krause, K. L. (2005). *Understanding and promoting student engagement in university learning communities*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.

Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper.

Mellor, D., Stokes, M., Firth, L., Hayashi, Y., & Cummins, R. (2008). Need for belonging, relationship satisfaction, loneliness, and life satisfaction. *Personality and Individual Differences, 45*(3), 213–218.

Morieson, L., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2013). Belonging in education: Lessons from the belonging project. *International Journal of First Year in Higher Education, 4*(2), 87–96.

Ribera, A. K., Miller, A. L., & Dumford, A. D. (2017). Sense of peer belonging and institutional acceptance in the first year: The role of high-impact practices. *Journal of College Student Development, 58*(4), 545–563.

RMIT University. (2015). *Ready for life and work: RMIT's strategic plan to 2020*. Retrieved January 20, 2017, from http://mams.rmit.edu.au/876tl55i1af1.pdf.

Strayhorn, T. L., Bie, F., Dorime-Williams, M. J., & Williams, M. S. (2016). Measuring the influence of Native American college students' interactions with diverse others on sense of belonging. *Journal of American Indian Education, 55*(1), 749–773.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students sense of belonging*. New York: Routledge.

Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagements and belonging in higher education at a time of change: Final report from the what works? Student retention and success programme*. England: Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Walton, G. M., Cohen, G. L., Cwir, D., & Spence, S. J. (2011). Mere belonging: The power of social connection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102*(3), 513–532.

Wilson, R., Murray, G., & Clarke, B. (2018a). The RMIT belonging strategy: Fostering student engagement in higher education. In D. Wache & D. Houston (Eds.), *Research and development in higher education: (Re) valuing higher education* (Vol. 41, pp. 257–266). Adelaide, Australia, 2–5 July 2018.

Wilson, R., Murray, G., & Clarke, B. (2018b). A grassroots, practical response to student belonging through learning and teaching experiences. In *4th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'18)*. València: Universitat Politècnica de València. http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/HEAd18.2018.8091.

Chapter 2
Partnerships for Learning and Belonging in Tertiary Education: A Social Capital Analysis

Andrea Chester, Alexandra Johnston and Angela Clarke

Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of peer partnership activities in tertiary education using the framework of social capital. The concept of social capital, with links to sociology, politics, economics and education, is used to explore the benefits that arise from peer to peer interactions, including student peer mentoring and staff observation of teaching programs. Although the concept of social capital is not widely discussed in the literature in either of these areas, the value of peer networks is at the core of both processes and social capital offers a way to think about and into these practices.

The chapter begins by describing the concept of social capital and its historical development. We define different types of social capital. Following this introduction, we examine the literature on student peer mentoring and staff peer observation of teaching, with a focus on how these two processes can build social capital for their participants and benefit tertiary institutions. A key driver for institutional growth in the tertiary education sector is the need to foster learning and professional environments that help people work more effectively together. Using these two common practices, we show how building social capital through positive and productive peer partnership relationships develops a sense of belonging and social cohesion in a range of settings and enhances learning. Findings from a range of studies summarised in this chapter, including our own research, show that students and staff, individuals and groups, were able to effectively build both trust, engagement and social cohesion, key variables that are often used to measure the benefits of building social capital.

A. Chester (✉) · A. Johnston · A. Clarke
School of Education, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia
e-mail: andrea.chester@rmit.edu.au

Social Capital

'Social capital can be understood quite simply as networks of social relations characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity. The essence of social capital is quality social relations' (Stone & Hughes, 2000, p. 20).

While the term social capital is often credited to Hanifan's (1912) advocacy for community engagement in rural education in the US, academic interest in the concept is relatively recent, with origins in the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1990s. Bourdieu (1998) compared social capital to economic and cultural capital, describing it as a product of the number of connections a person has and the volume of the economic and cultural capital inherent in each of those members. At the same time Coleman (1988), also a sociologist, was exploring the application of social capital in the context of education and Fukuyama (1995), a political economist, was exploring its economic and political functions. But it was the American political scientist, Robert Putnam, who popularised the concept of social capital (Halpern, 2005). In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, published in 1993, Putnam and his co-authors argued that the relative performance of regional governments in Italy over a 20-year period was due not to innovative policy or fiscal management, but rather to levels of civic engagement and social networks, in other words, social capital. In his next work, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) turned his attention to North America and explored social capital in the context of civic and religious participation, workplace and social connections, altruism, volunteering and philanthropy, social movements and the Internet. It was this work that captured widespread attention, within and outside academic circles.

Social capital is thus multidisciplinary in nature, drawing on sociology, political science and economics in its development and more recently finding application in disciplines from history to health science (Field, 2008). In education, the roots of social capital predate Hanifan (1912) with the word found in the early writings of John Dewey. In *The Elementary School Record*, Dewey commented on an education system that would 'unlock to the child the wealth of social capital which lies beyond the possible range of his limited individual experience' (1900, p. 230).

What Is Social Capital?

With its diverse disciplinary origins, it is not surprising that those writing in the area approach the concept from different perspectives. While critics have argued there is a need for clarity (Halpern, 2005; Woolcock, 2001), in essence social capital is a remarkably straightforward concept. As Field (2008) notes, the central thesis of social capital can be 'summed up in two words: relationships matter' (p. 1).

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) described social capital as the 'collective value of social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other' (p. 19). According to Putnam, the features of social networks—trust,

reciprocity, information sharing and cooperation—are both a private benefit as well as a public good, bringing advantages to the people connected by those relationships and often for others. Like the physical capital that exists in education contexts (such as the technologies, facilities and resources) and human capital (such as the skill and knowledge of the staff), social capital, Putnam argued, has the potential to increase the productivity of both individuals and collectives. As Benbow and Lee (2018) explain, social capital emerges when one invests in cultivating social ties. Paxton (1999) notes that for social capital to develop those ties need to be reciprocal, trusting and involve positive emotion.

Different types of social capital have been described, with a distinction drawn between **bonding social capital**, exclusive relationships between like people in similar situations and **bridging social capital**, inclusive relationships between like people across social groupings (Field, 2008). Putnam (2000) described the former as a sociological superglue holding people together and the latter as a kind of WD40, lubricating and protecting relationships. According to Lin (2001), whose work has informed social capital research in the discipline of education, the two types of social capital serve different purposes. The strong ties of bonding social capital serve to reinforce identity-focused goals. In contrast, the weaker ties of bridging social capital can provide access to new resources and facilitate the achievement of instrumental goals.

While bonding and bridging social capital have been described as *horizontal* metaphors describing relationships between essentially homogeneous community members, Woolcock (2001) identified a third and *vertical* form of social capital, **linking social capital**, which describes alliances with people who provide a 'capacity to leverage resources, ideas, and information from formal institutions beyond the community' (p. 14) and provide links to power outside the group.

In the following sections, we use the lens of these forms of social capital to explore two common practices in tertiary education: peer mentoring for students and staff peer observation of teaching. Through the framework of bonding, bridging and linking social capital, it is possible to evaluate the social capital potential of these two aspects of tertiary education practice and the ways in which these social networks are positively transforming tertiary education.

Social Capital in Tertiary Education: Student Peer Mentoring

Leveraging social capital amongst students offers a sustainable and efficient solution to multiple challenges currently facing tertiary education. As the number and diversity of students entering tertiary education increase (Parr, 2015), institutions need to develop efficient and effective ways to manage student transition and engagement. Peer mentoring has become a standard element in best practice models of first-year transition and retention (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010). Indeed, as Egege

and Kutieleh (2015) note 'while not exactly a "silver bullet", peer mentoring appears to be the single most effective way to prevent attrition and low satisfaction rates' (p. 266).

Tertiary education institutions have been using mentoring for many years and several reviews of research on mentoring in education now exist, spanning more than 25 years of practice (for example, Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Egege & Kutieleh, 2015; Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Gerschenfeld, 2014; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011; Jacobi, 1991; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). These reviews have confirmed four functions of student mentoring in tertiary education:

- emotional and psychological support;
- help with academic content and subject knowledge;
- direct assistance with career and professional development;
- role modelling.

Together these four functions emphasise the social capital implicit in the mentoring process, underscoring the core ways in which 'relationships matter' in student mentoring, from providing social support, to facilitating academic progress and professional development.

In a paper critiquing the lack of definitional and theoretical clarity in the field of mentoring, Barry Bozeman and Mary Feeney acknowledged the central role that social capital might play, defining mentoring as:

> a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé), (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007, p. 731).

In the same year, Hezlett and Gibson (2007) published a comprehensive review of the alignment of social capital and workplace mentoring programs, showing how a small number of studies have drawn explicitly on social capital theory and a wider literature has implicitly aligned with social capital elements. Hezlett and Gibson provide a comprehensive argument, demonstrating how both the mentoring and social capital literature have shared a focus on the value of relationships and common constructs including positive outcomes, negative experiences, trust and information exchange.

While social capital has been linked to mentoring in the workplace, there have been few explicit references to social capital in the tertiary education mentoring literature. Gerschenfeld (2014), in a review of 20 undergraduate mentoring programs, noted that social capital had been used as a conceptual framework in only two. In the first of these, Mekolichick and Gibbs (2012) analysed benefits derived from research-focused mentoring for sociology undergraduates, noting differences in the approaches taken by first-generation students and those with a family history of tertiary study, concluding that these differences could be explained by the concept of cultural capital. Gannon and Maher (2012) referenced social capital theory, drawing parallels between social capital and mentoring theory, citing three studies that