

Chicken soup for the soul: promoting well-being and belonging through food and cultural competence skills

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Presentation abstract

This conference paper asked a question: what does well-being and belonging in Teaching and learning development look like in practice? The paper presentation focused on two Kingston University initiatives to develop and enhance students' sense of well-being and belonging: Cultural Food Stories and Cultural Competence skills workshops were explored in the session to create a conversation about how learning developers could move into the extra-curricular space to create a sense of belonging through communal dining. Food is universal and has cultural and social meanings (Dunbar, 2017). During the physical separation experienced throughout the pandemic, the Cultural Food Stories initiative explored whether recipe and story sharing could enhance staff and student belonging, while simultaneously honouring cultural diversity. Given the importance of belonging in enhancing student learning, engagement, and retention (Tinto, 2017), this is highly pertinent. To enhance student success, it is also essential to equip students with the skills they need to appreciate how cultural differences and similarities help to enhance personal and professional interactions rather than to stereotype or marginalise.

The Cultural Competence skills initiative creates tailored workshops to support students' ability to understand and respect their own and others' cultural background and values. These strategies help to equip our students with the resilience and skills needed to thrive and be successful professionals in their future careers. In our paper, we argue that wellbeing and belonging are key tools for developing students' learning and can be easily incorporated into educational practice. By inviting diverse students to participate within each of these initiatives, their cultural heritage is not only welcomed but also acknowledged explicitly. Attendees will leave with a practical toolkit to embed our Cultural

Food Stories and Cultural Competence skills initiatives as part of their teaching and learning practice and devise associated activities that enhance professional development skills and better support all our students, regardless of background.

Community response

I was very interested in Hilda's idea of asking students to share a recipe and the impact that this might have on a student's sense of belonging and feeling valued. Including how the personal, cultural, and/or religious significance of the recipe allows students to connect on a personal level. Food is a commonality that we all share and it would be great to see this project replicated in other institutions, I will definitely be suggesting it at mine. Please could Hilda share the link to the online recipe book.

Thank you for this. Here you go: https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Cultural-Food-Stories_Cookbook-2021.pdf. Hope it is useful. It would be really interesting to hear if you do something similar, and how it worked out for you. I wrote the project up as a little paper which I can also upload, if that would be useful. I'd also be happy to talk to people at your institution about it, if that would help.

There was something so affirming and positive about this presentation. I so enjoyed listening to how the projects had been created and responded to. It was great to hear about the ways you'd found of connecting and celebrating within the pandemic especially, when folks were disconnected from each other, from family, from travel, and potentially from home.

Next steps and additional questions

Looking ahead, there are many considerations when bringing community building practices into the curriculum and learning development space. Questions such as, what strategies have you devised at your institution to enhance students' sense of belonging and wellbeing? How do you think that our workshop will impact on your own practice? Are there any possibilities of adapting our ideas for your own institutions, or are you already doing anything similar? If so, are there opportunities for possible joint working across institutions? What is your one 'take home' from our workshop?

Editorial comment

This presentation explored methods of developing and creating a sense of belonging for students through learning development initiatives. Reading the authors' and participants' considered and thoughtful contributions, gives a sense of the 'affirming and positive' nature of this session. The headline activity of this initiative was a recipe sharing exercise where students shared recipes important to them, their family, and their culture. This exercise built upon literature relating to belonging to give a sense of community and mattering to students. The group outlined how important belonging is and how 'low hanging' food could be as a common sharing opportunity for all staff and students. One comment outlined the importance of not alienating through the process, as food can sometimes be weaponised and alienate certain students (e.g., meat-based BBQs can alienate vegetarians, vegans, and students with cultural and/or religious meat prohibitions).

The theme resonates with the contributions included in the 'Prioritising wellbeing through community and connection' section of the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education's* special issue 'Compendium of Innovative Practice', summed up eloquently in the editorial as addressing the 'theme of uncertainty, anxiety, and disconnection, and the deep need to address it in an empathetic, kind, and supportive way' (Syska, 2021).

Authors' reflection

We wonder whether any of the ideas we shared will impact on your own practices, or offer possibilities for doing so in the future? I suppose an important aspect is ensuring that students (and staff) feel safe in whatever is offered to them. The food side can be very contested, with food sometimes weaponised as a way of excluding people or showing that they don't belong. This can leave real scars which need to be navigated with care. So any food-related intervention should be approached with openness, and assumptions should not be made about the positive roles food plays in our lives – it often (even usually) does have positive associations, but not for everyone. Similarly, with Karen's work, real care is needed in discussing potentially divisive issues. However, there is also the fact that offering these opportunities for staff and students is a clear sign that cultural diversity is not

only recognised but valued, which in itself may be useful. We'd be interested in any thoughts about this.

Thank you for raising such important points about the value and also the challenges of discussing what can be challenging topics. Conversations always require an element of courage as we do not know how our comments will be interpreted by those with whom we are talking to. What Hilda and I try to do with our respective projects is to provide students and staff with the tools they need to be able to have those courageous conversations mindfully and with empathy, not only in HE but also beyond. If you or your colleagues are engaging in similar work please let us know. We would love to hear from colleagues in our community to continue the discussion and possibly explore future research.

Acknowledgments

We are really grateful to the participants of Cultural Food Stories and Cultural Competence skills workshops. We know that sharing personal perspectives through food or courageous discussions is not easy, and without their generous participation, none of this work would have been possible. We do not take that for granted. We also thank those who attended our session and contributed to the discussion, which has given us a lot to think about.

References

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