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# Through a Pedagogy of Belonging: Creating Cross-Cultural Bridges in Doctoral Programs

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"The direction in which education starts a [person], will determine [their] future life. Does it not always attract like that?" –Plato[1]

Cross-cultural mentoring matters in higher education. Campuses are hotbeds of culture: students, faculty, and staff bring distinct epistemologies, customs, and ways of being, living, and learning depending on their cultural and subcultural affiliations. While the literature on teaching at the K-12 level demonstrates that student success outcomes for girls, as well as students of color, are correlated when there is a demographic match between teacher and student (Egalite & Kisida, 2018), research on the idea of cross-cultural mentoring in higher education is limited. This article highlights the positive aspects of faculty-student relationships in doctoral programs that are cross-cultural rather than identical. These cross-cultural relationships can form turning points that start students down particular paths that, as Plato emphasized, "determine [their] future life."

In this article, a student (Jessica) and professor (Julie) with cross-cultural characteristics—such as race, various identities, power dynamics, and backgrounds—offer a thesis that pedagogies of belonging, or educational strategies meant to foster a sense of belonging, that start in the classroom can create cross-cultural bridges that endure throughout doctoral study, and enrich the lives of both teacher and student. We begin with our personal stories: a Ph.D. student who is Asian American, cisgender and heterosexual, an immigrant, and a transracial adoptee raised by white parents; and a professor who is white, LGBTQ, and raised by biological parents of the same race. We each identify a parallel experience in education where a sense of belonging was borne of a cross-cultural interaction, and where key, positive academic outcomes resulted. The article then reflects on the importance of finding a sense of belonging in higher education, and the ways in which a pedagogy of belonging—an approach to teaching that places emphasis on every student being and feeling like a valuable, integral part of the classroom community—can help create cross-cultural bridges between faculty mentors and doctoral students. We conclude by explaining how to deploy a pedagogy of belonging in the classroom and beyond.

## Our Stories

### Jessica Fry: A Cross-Cultural Experience at The University of Texas at Austin

It was the first day of class my sophomore year of college in a conservative, predominantly white suburb of Chicago. I glanced nervously at my classmates who were all talking and laughing. I had just changed my major and moved out of the conservatory of music, and I didn't see any familiar

[1] *The Republic*, Book IV (translated by Benjamin Jowett), p. 380. Retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm#link2H_4_0007

faces in the room. The professor—an extremely popular teacher with a waitlist for his class—began taking role.

"Jessica TenBrink?" he called out. I raised my hand. He glanced at me quizzically. "TenBrink...isn't that Dutch?" he asked. My face began burning as I felt everyone in the room turn to look at me. "Yes, it is," I replied, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "But you aren't Dutch. Why do you have a Dutch last name?"

In that moment, like so many just like it throughout my life, I felt a surge of panic as my "fight or flight" instincts kicked in. My mind raced as I looked at the door, wondering how fast I could sprint across the room. I wanted to simultaneously cry from shame and scream out of anger at being publicly singled out for having brown skin and a white last name. But as always, I felt myself go numb as I responded politely, explaining that I had been adopted into a Dutch family. Satisfied, the professor moved on, and my classmates stopped staring at me. But this moment was a lasting reminder that I did not belong.

Because of countless experiences like this one, I have rarely felt a true sense of educational belonging. I am also a naturally quiet and introverted person. These traits are often perceived negatively by others and compounded by stereotypes about Asian women. When I began as a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), I was worried, as usual, about fitting in. Because of a crisis in my personal life the first week of school, I wondered if I had made a mistake moving across the country for a Ph.D. program.

One of my classes in the first semester was Technology and Innovation with Dr. Julie Schell. When we went over the syllabus, I felt a deep sense of dread when Julie mentioned the weekly quizzes we would take in class. I have always struggled with test anxiety, and worried about my ability to perform well—I even considered dropping the class. There was also a section in the syllabus on social learning, in which Julie stated, "I believe my job is to *learn* you so I can best help you succeed." By this, she meant to learn about us, how we think, and how we learn.

I quickly discovered that Technology and Innovation was unlike any class I had taken before. In Julie, I found a professor who created projects that required out-of-the-box, creative thinking (e.g., using a new app to learn about the process of adoption, creating an educational game), who re-framed common misconceptions about the process of learning (people learn through retrieving information from their memory), and provided in-depth, timely feedback (even on things done well).

At an extremely difficult time in my life, I found affirmation in Technology and Innovation. The course challenged me in new ways, such as dealing with ambiguity and becoming comfortable with making mistakes that I could transfer outside the classroom walls. The latter was especially difficult for me. I had spent my entire life as an avid rule-follower whose perfectionist tendencies loathed even a hint of error. However, I began feeling a sense of comfort in class, particularly when Julie would read my work and seemed to internalize what I had written by incorporating it into her teaching practice. I felt cared for and encouraged, both academically and personally. I didn't feel judged or misunderstood. I spent that first semester at UT Austin simply trying to survive, and some days I felt like it took all of my energy just to show up to class. I never spent time at Julie's office hours like many of my classmates. But I felt a sense of belonging in the class nonetheless, which helped carry me through a difficult initial semester.

I began working with Julie in a research capacity during the summer of 2017, going into my second year of my doctoral program. During our first meeting, I felt uneasy and nervous about the lack of direct instruction I was given. Instead, I was being treated as a colleague and equal during our conversation. We brainstormed together, talked openly about different directions for research projects, and spoke a little bit about my dissertation topic and why I had chosen it. I was worried about giving the wrong answer or saying something that would cause Julie to no longer want to work with me, but felt constantly reassured through Julie's affirmations that I was free to speak openly and freely as we discussed possible directions for new projects. As a result, it did not take long for the same sense of belonging that I experienced in her class to settle in. Julie highlighted my strengths and wondered aloud how to best utilize them in a research capacity.

Julie and I have worked together regularly since then. The direction of my dissertation work changed after I began working with her, and she now serves on my dissertation committee. After many conversations in which she challenged me to think critically about my dissertation, I was able to 1) give myself permission to change my dissertation topic (essentially starting over), 2) face some ambiguity, and 3) extend myself grace in the process. While I was plagued with doubt at the time, I am now confident in the decision I made. Julie's guidance—which was never laced with an ulterior motive or pressure—led me to discover that the underlying theme of *all* of my research interests is directly tied to my personal experiences: how underrepresented and marginalized students experience educational belonging. Julie has played a supportive role in my research, and the cross-cultural experiences I have had working with her have made me a better scholar and helped me envision a positive academic career trajectory.

**Julie Schell: A Cross-Cultural Experience at The University of Nevada Reno**

The beginning of the school year at UT Austin is always an exciting one for me. Having chosen higher education as the field I would dedicate my life to, being on a college campus on the first day of school is exhilarating. I always try to arrive at our classroom early so that I can personally introduce myself to each student, make sure I know how to pronounce each of their names clearly and correctly, welcome them to the class, and make eye contact and shake hands depending on cultural preferences (for some students, shaking hands or strong eye contact can be culturally inappropriate).

In 2002, on my first day of class as a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University in *College Student Development Theory,* my professor, Dr. Lee Knefelkamp, completed a version of this first-day ceremony. I was surprised as I watched her take her time making the rounds, eagerly waiting for my turn to say hello and join the community of practice she was building for us. I have spent the majority of my waking life in classrooms with most of the moments forgotten—but this one endured.

As I replicate this ritual each year, I am actively trying to ensure that each of my students understands that they belong in our classroom. I emphasize in my syllabus that I believe it is my job to "learn" my students: I pay attention to their behavior traces—for example, their body language, how often they speak up, how comfortable they seem to feel, and how they use language. I relish the opportunity to see the ways they change as the subject matter I love unfolds and comes alive through their own viewpoints. Trained in a strong John Deweyan and Gloria Ladson-Billings tradition (under Dr. Anna Neumann), I have always practiced culturally responsive teaching, and privileged student experience and culture as content just as valuable as any theory, principle, or construct we will study

in a given course. I love to see how students' minds intersect with the ideas of the theorists, researchers, and scholars who watch over our field.

During my first day introductions in 2016, I met Jessica. Like I did with every student, I took a mental note of our interaction so that I could look back at the end of the semester and get a sense of *how* she learned, as much as *what* she learned. I could tell as I reached my hand across the desk that she was nervous and surprised by the gesture. I had no idea at the time that the course would provide Jessica the window to belonging that it did. For all its wonders, higher education can sometimes be a frightening and lonely place for some students who feel ostracized rather than a sense of belonging. While there are many programmatic structures to help students feel belonging, I learned early on that faculty can and do play a key role in cultivating that culture.

I went to college at the University of Nevada Reno in the early 1990s—which at the time, was a conservative college town. When I tried to come out as an LGBTQ person on campus, I was surprised by the vitriol and hatred I faced. I felt safest in my classrooms, which were focused on science and math. During a particularly rough time, the only place I felt welcome was in my introductory physics course with Dr. Ronald Phaneuf, which happened to be in a large auditorium. I came early, sat in the front row, and went to every office hour available with the professor, staying as late as I could. He sat with me day after day, earnestly trying to explain the beauty he saw in physics as well as the role it plays in our lives. He was a different gender, was a few decades my senior, was the chair of the department in a discipline I really did not understand, and had a wife and children. We never spoke of anything other than physics, and despite the unlikely match, he would emerge as one of the most important cross-cultural mentors of my life. Even though our interactions were only about physics, as I look back, my persistence in showing up for office hours, sitting in the front row, and e-mailing outside of class was exhibiting a desire line: a hidden path or habit trace that humans create through their behaviors or actions but they do not outright state or share. At the time I was not aware of that; however, as a teacher I can now spot when students dig this same kind of habit trace in my classroom.

Those moments of pedagogical care in Dr. Phaneuf's classroom and office hours set me on a journey to dedicate my life to understanding the power of teaching and learning. I would go on to take a higher-level physics course with Dr. Phaneuf, dedicate my dissertation on teaching and learning to him, and ironically, complete a post-doctoral fellowship in a physics education lab at Harvard University. This story exemplifies the bridge that a pedagogy of belonging can create between cross-demographic faculty and student pairs and the thriving that can unfold from such connections.

**Realizing the Importance of Educational Belonging During a Cross-Cultural Experience**

Technology and Innovation—where we first met—was not a class focused specifically on cultural topics. Neither was Julie's physics course. The mentoring in both cases had very little to do with any of the personal life struggles either of us were experiencing outside the classroom. This is a key point: cross-cultural mentoring can start with a simple understanding and awareness by faculty that students have lives outside academia and may have be facing serious struggles that are not showing externally. It is not always necessary for students to fully disclose those struggles to faculty in order for strong, life-changing, cross-cultural interactions to take shape.

We have experienced different challenges related to educational belonging; yet, these differences have helped facilitate a unique and important mentoring relationship. Over the past few years, our

working relationship has been largely through email, texting, and other online communication platforms. When we do have the opportunity to meet in person, however, there is no disconnect or discomfort.

Having this kind of faculty-student, cross-cultural mentorship is especially important because of what research on educational belonging in graduate school has shown—that overall, Ph.D. students desire more support and mentoring from faculty throughout their program than what they receive (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000). Due to a fear of appearing weak, few students feel they can rely on their faculty mentors for assistance in "times of weakness, doubt or crisis" (Barna, 2000, p. 5).

Stressing the importance of cross-cultural mentoring relationships is not to say that there is not value in having a mentor with similar cultural or demographic traits; after all, representation for minoritized populations in particular is critical. Jessica, for example, was impacted by the fact that she never had an Asian American teacher growing up. Faculty and students in cross-cultural mentoring relationships can have similar identities as well as different ones—Julie and Jessica are both women in education who have struggled at times with minoritized identities. But their wide array of cross-cultural differences, in addition to their similarities, strengthen their relationship because they each bring different experiences and perspectives to the table.

## Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

Different social and academic interactions shape how students experience belonging in college. Students who feel a strong sense of belonging often have enhanced "affiliation and identity with their colleges" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 328). This impacts their level of stress and access to coping resources. Various stresses can occur during college that are associated with moving, adjusting to a rigorous curricula and new classes, navigating a new social environment, and needing to independently manage time (Garriott & Nisle, 2017). This section will look explore the cognitive and affective dimensions of sense of belonging, how a sense of belonging is formed, and the importance of belonging in doctoral programs.

### Cognitive and Affective Dimensions

Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) work on cohesion—theoretically defined as the "extent to which individual group members feel '"stuck to,' or part of, particular social groups"—provides a framework for understanding the phenomena of a sense of belonging in higher education (p. 482). Experiencing a sense of belonging is both cognitive and affective (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). Along the cognitive dimension, individuals form a sense of belonging by taking in and processing information from experiences within a group. Individuals are then able to evaluate and judge their perceived belonging, or lack thereof.

Along the affective dimension, individuals develop a "morale," or feelings about their judgements of belonging that motivate further action. For example, if a student's sense of belonging is low in higher education, it may lead to feelings of isolation and pain. This can in turn influence a student's decision to prematurely leave college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2018).

## Forming a Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging can be defined as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992, p. 173). These systems can include relationships or organizations, in either natural or cultural environments.

Following Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) conception of sense of belonging, a student—attending the first class of the semester, on their first day of school—will accumulate a variety of information from their environment. For example, they will take in information about the subject matter, their classmates, the setup of the room, the professor, various personal interactions, and more. The student will process this information and evaluate (or make judgements) about how "stuck" they are or how well they fit in with the group, judging how much or how little they belong. As a student's sense of belonging forms, and the affective dimension emerges in feelings or morale, a student's actions and behaviors in and outside of the classroom will be influenced (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990).

## Belonging in Doctoral Programs

While a growing body of literature highlights the importance of non-cognitive factors—such as sense of belonging—for undergraduate students, much less research exists on graduate students (Pascale, 2018). As many doctoral students quickly discover, however, finding a sense of belonging in graduate school is just as critical for academic success and program completion.

For students in Ph.D. programs, a 50% attrition rate (Cassuto, 2013) serves as a bleak reminder that earning a doctorate is a difficult journey. Doctoral students can experience extreme isolation and paranoia, often resulting from a sink-or-swim departmental philosophy or culture built around critique (Patterson, 2016). But Ph.D. students are willing to make great sacrifices—with time, finances, and personal relationships—in order to pursue their degree and academic goals (Barna, 2000).

Hagerty et al. (1992) described sense of belonging through two dimensions: valued involvement (experiencing the feeling of value, need, and acceptance) and fit—the perception that personal characteristics "articulate with or complement the system or environment" (p. 173). Faculty advisors can help encourage the positive beliefs students have about themselves, their ability to succeed in a Ph.D. program, and combat extreme isolation and feelings of imposter syndrome. This can facilitate the development of a sense of belonging for graduate students. Pascale (2018) found that having a close relationship with faculty was critical to creating a sense of belonging for graduate students.

Connectedly, positive relationships with faculty advisors leads to higher rates of completion for doctoral students. Lovitts (2001) asserted that graduate students who did *not* finish their degrees were more likely to describe impersonal advisors who lacked investment in student interests, research, and professional development. Numerous studies (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Golde, 2005; Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connoly, 1983) have found a relationship between lower attrition rates for doctoral students and positive relationships with their advisors. When graduate students have the perception that their advisor is supportive, they develop a stronger sense of belonging as well as a more positive view of their successes as a student (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). Despite having very different backgrounds, life experiences, and personalities, the faculty-student relationship works well because of the mutual respect for each other's talents and strengths.

## Deploying a Pedagogy of Belonging

Students' sense of belonging can be forged through campus activities and university-wide interventions, as well as through interactions with individual faculty members. There is no single prescription for deploying a pedagogy of belonging, nor a specific method or approach to teaching that encourages students' perceived sense of "stickiness" to the community we create in our classrooms. But faculty can design pedagogies of belonging by creating practices that help them learn their students.

Ways that faculty deploy a pedagogy of belonging include:

- Sharing your intention to learn about them on your syllabus
- Observing student habit traces as opportunities to create belonging
- Knowing and referring to students by name and pronouncing their names correctly
- Internalizing the content of your students' work in your classroom, and referring to or taking note of standout features
- Encouraging students who are excelling or struggling
- Inviting students to collaborate on research or other projects
- Talking with students outside of class about academic content
- Knowing and caring about their lives
- Being culturally competent and responsive, and owning and apologizing for cross-cultural mistakes when you make them

Dr. Cassandre Alvarado, Executive Director of Student Success at UT Austin, reflects that "the effects of feeling like you are known by your faculty carry well beyond graduation from our institutions" (Alvarado, 2019, para. 4). As mentioned above, one of the easiest ways for faculty to help improve student success outcomes in particular is to learn and use their names (Alvarado, 2019). A recent survey of UT Austin alumni found that undergraduates felt that "having a professor who cared about them as a person" was critical to their well-being and ability to thrive (Gallop Organization, 2017). In addition, having this experience strongly related to the likelihood that alumni would thrive in various well-being areas, such as socially, financially, physically, and within their communities (Alvarado, 2019).

## Implications for Practice

Having cross-cultural mentoring relationships between faculty mentors and doctoral students with distinct rather than matched demographics can help foster a sense of belonging for students. This is critical for increased rates of retention and graduation for Ph.D. students.
Starting with pedagogy, faculty can create open lines of communication, in which mentors take a vested interest in learning about their individual students on a deeper level than just assigning grades. When students feel valued and cared about in their educational setting, they are more likely to excel and flourish.

Taking the time to internalize students' work can provide insight for faculty on how to encourage students, whether they are excelling or struggling. Some students may perform well academically while personally struggling, which may be more difficult to decipher. However, by being in tune with their students, faculty will be able to better catch warning signs in students who are struggling personally.

If Ph.D. students live in fear of disappointing their faculty mentor, or worry about appearing weak and unable to succeed, their sense of belonging in the program will be diminished. We want to emphasize that we recognize that the faculty and pedagogical role is not one of parent or mental health counselor. Rather, by fostering a sense of belonging in the academic setting, faculty-doctoral student cross-cultural relationships can go a long way toward ameliorating disparities and encourage successful student outcomes.

In order to help facilitate building cross-cultural bridges with students, faculty need to be educated on what it means to deploy a pedagogy of belonging, and how to best do so. Here are three ways this can be done campus-wide:

1. *Training in concepts of belonging*: During new faculty orientation—or at other faculty training events—the importance of students' sense of belonging should be addressed. In many cases, faculty engage in tactics such as "weed out" or "sink or swim." This can unnecessarily harm students—often from minoritized populations—who are talented and capable of succeeding. By implementing the practices outlined above, faculty can identify ways to learn their students and encourage success.
2. *Having specialists in faculty development centers*: Researchers or scholars who specialize in work on belonging can encourage faculty to deploy a pedagogy of belonging. Symposiums, round tables, and think tanks can engage and encourage faculty with concrete tips and tactics on ways to modify (often in small ways) their teaching or classroom environment.
3. *Policies and programs that promote mentoring cross-culturally*: This can be done through the creation of cross-cultural mentoring communities, committees, or learning communities, within or across academic disciplines. For a woman doctoral student in STEM, for example, it may be beneficial and uplifting to be in a mentoring relationship with a woman faculty member in her field, with other crossing identities (e.g., age, race, sexual orientation).

## Conclusion

Through collaboration on projects, journal articles, or research, faculty can foster an outside-of-class relationship with their doctoral students. This is critical for many Ph.D. students who anticipate a future career in the same area as their faculty mentor. These collaborative experiences can provide a way for faculty and students to learn more about one another and create a more personalized learning environment for both. Faculty who highlight the strengths of their students—even praising those that the faculty may personally be lacking—can provide students with reassurance that they belong in their educational space at the departmental, institutional, and even industry level.

Despite our different identities and backgrounds, we each experienced a sense of belonging that emerged from a positive cross-cultural relationship in higher education. As we have reflected on in this article, finding a sense of belonging is critical for doctoral students. By engaging in and deploying a pedagogy of belonging, faculty mentors can help create cross-cultural bridges with their students to help ensure their success in their graduate program and beyond.

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