1. **Slide 1: Introduction, to the Context of belonging:**

"Belonging, as Baumeister and Leary define, is the sense of mattering and interpersonal connectedness—a basic human need that drives motivation and behaviour. In my teaching practice I wanted to hone an area where pastoral care and creative practice intertwine, vital in arts education, where collaboration and personal expression are central. Yet Belonging remains challenging to cultivate in a way that feels both meaningful and measurable.

As belonging is the next step on the equity, diversity, and inclusion ladder. Joanna West asks, ‘Does everyone feel valued, connected, and able to be their authentic self?’ For underrepresented students, this sense of inclusion is critical in addressing systemic inequities.

Not just a buzzword - Research shows its directly linked to enhancing resilience, mental health, student success, motivation and retention. Equally is the importance of meaningful staff-student interaction and developing learners' identities in Impacting confidence and artistic identity.

My question began: how can we as educators actively shape spaces that not only welcome but empower all students to flourish in a way that is meaningful and tangible?

1. **Slide 2: A Bit of Background about me**

I teach Fine Art Painting at UAL’s FAD. In both my Painting practice and my teaching roles, I pay attention to how personal expression—shapes our creativity and artistic processes giving value and meaning to what we create but also to our sense of belonging within creative community’s. That understanding, underpins my Action Research Project - where I seek to explore students stories and visually creative voices empowering them to thrive.

1. **UAL Research Context**

UAL, as a social purpose university, of —25,000 students—is dedicated to nurturing wellbeing and building inclusive societies.

However, translating these ideals into daily student experiences is complex, take the latest Foundation merger - prompting significant shifts in structure’s and environments. Tutorials now online, serve as students’ first meaningful connection with a tutor, where students may feel adrift. “Belonging” Through Compassion at UAL has become a crucial concept, yet do we share a clear understanding of what it really means? And what our role is in nurturing it?

UAL’s strategy encourages that rather than doing more, just do things differently, there’s tensions between institutional aspirations and meaningful enactment on the ground. I looked at bridging this gap, exploring how we can nurture belonging and inclusion within the curriculum’s tutorials, ensuring UAL’s aspirations become lived realities for every learner.

1. **Research Question:**

Given the challenges—my question became: *How can the Tutorials be structured to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion? Particularly within the initial pastoral/academic tutorials?* Inquiry’s focused on creating inclusive spaces for students adjusting into new academic and social contexts.

To achieve this, I incorporated visual participatory methods, offering students creative and reflective ways to express their feelings about the course, their artistic identity and course challenges. These activities supported students artistically, academically and pastorally, providing a safe space to share experiences and establish their place within the learning community from the outset.

### Research Rationale: Significance of belonging for creativity and success in HE.

In creative disciplines, students take vulnerable, creative intellectual and emotional risks, so fostering belonging early is critical. Tutorials—spaces of connection and reflection, empathy and co-curation—are uniquely positioned to address this need. Where learners feel valued and included, they’re more likely to engage, and thrive.

Belonging is relational, defined by Hagerty as personal involvement in an environment so individuals feel integral to the system. Strayhorn establishes the heightened importance for students finding themselves in unfamiliar or vulnerable contexts—navigating new academic or cultural contexts.

1. **Art-Based Action Research (ABAR) Framework**

I adopted Art-Based Action Research, (in short ABAR), frameworks, engaging reflection, dialogue, and inclusion through artistic expression. Creating a triadic relationship between the learner, tutor, and artwork, allow meaning to emerge organically.

I used reflective prompt questions and integrated embodied, tacit, and sensory knowledge, what Bollas described as revealing primal, unconscious forms of cognition.

Inspired by models depicting learning as an interconnected system—much like a kinetic mobile. This metaphor highlights how elements like environment, stakeholders, and personal experiences interact fluidly shaping learning journeys. Promoting explorations of identity and experience authentically, supporting diverse voices and self-efficacy to those who may feel disconnected or excluded in traditional settings.

1. **ABAR METHOD 1 planning and interventions**

The first method I used was Photovoice, involving students taking and selecting one photograph representing their feelings about the course or practice. On teams students shared their chosen image, which became a starting point for explaining through the photo, enabling reflection, discussion and analysis.

This method empowers students by giving them control over what they share, thus what is portrayed and analysed, shaping focus of the discussion. It also encourages expressions that may not easily convey in words.

1. **ABAR METHOD 2 Planning and Interventions**

The second method, Metaphorical Self-Portrait, a two-minute drawing expressing how participants see their artistic identity.

Drawing provided a powerful medium here for self-expression, building connections through shared reflection, this approach sparked discussions around how participants narrate their identity, and internal world, reinforcing ‘self-authorship, and confidence.

1. **ABAR METHOD 3 Planning and Interventions**

"The third was the ‘Stuckness’ method, a two-minute drawing reflecting where they felt stuck.

Introduced later on in the tutorial, It encouraged students to unpack challenges helping to visualize and articulate challenges— like creative blocks, logistical hurdles, or cultural disconnection.

By externalizing barriers to ‘stuckness, the activity addressed agency and created space for collaborative problem-solving, creating space for solutions and steps toward progress."

1. **Ethics**

I grouped the ethical framework into categories; Consent, Confidentiality, Minimizing Bias, Barriers to Engagement. Obtaining informed consent via email and ensuring students understood the purpose, methods, and anonymization of their data. Confidentiality and the right to withdraw were emphasized to create a comfortable environment. To reduce bias in observational data, I reflected on my dual role as tutor and researcher, co-created empathetic, respectful, *non-judgment* guidelines with students, and designed neutral questions. This socially responsible approach prioritized consent, anonymity, and a student-centred ethos.

*I followed a clear ethical framework beginning by obtaining informed consent via email, explaining the purpose, methods, and how any data, like photos and drawings, would be anonymized and used. Confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point were emphasized to make students comfortable.*

*I acknowledge that there are inherent challenges with bias in the observational reflective data findings. To minimize this, I reflected on my dual role as tutor and researcher, co-creating guidelines with students that emphasized empathy, non-judgment, and respectful sharing during tutorials. I also carefully designed questions to avoid leading responses and ensured feedback forms respected consent and anonymity. This approach aligned with a socially responsible, student-centred research ethos.*

1. **Photovoice findings**

The Photovoice data findings included eight students’ images and their verbal reflections, there were multiple groupings, bur some of those key themes: Aspirations, Artistic Identity, and connection.

**Student 1** shared a sculpture of an x-ray bone, symbolizing adaptability and growth through challenges. (blue representative of emotional struggle). Their reflection about being happy despite those challenges highlighted their resilience and connection between personal growth and their academic journey. This image reflected that balancing of personal difficulties with their artistic development suggesting that despite feeling stuck there was a deep sense of perseverance and hope.

**Student 2** presented monochrome butterflies, symbolizing their feelings of confusion and excitement. Reflecting the tension between confusion and ambition, connecting emotions such as feeling both overwhelmed and motivated by their connection to nature and the elements to professional aspirations in fashion textiles. This image beautifully captured the tension between uncertainty and ambition. Illustrating perfectly how they connected personal feelings to their professional aspirations.

***Student 3’s*** *self-portrait with funny glasses reflected on their journey from Peru, where art is not traditionally seen as a career. They expressed challenges adjusting to the course’s pace, while also embracing family support. This image and reflection revealed the intersection of cultural identity and academic aspirations, shedding light on navigating personal histories while adapting to new academic and creative environments.*

Together illustrating connection’s to their creative identities, aspirations, and connection, offered insights into emotional and academic states.

1. **Metaphorical portrait findings**

The metaphorical self-portrait data findings included eight students’ images and their verbal reflections, there were multiple groupings, but revealed themes such as disconnection and adjustment.

***Student 7*** *s drawing of a bucket, symbolized feeling ‘half full’—representing their process of adjusting to the course’s fast pace and unfamiliar structure. Saying : 'Moodle and Workflow have been difficult, but I’m gaining confidence.' This illustrates how some students are still adapting to academic systems.*

**Student 6**, gestural graphite face emphasized an exciting energetic artistic process. sharing: 'I like making quick, spontaneous art, but structured assignments feel stressful. This exposed the tension between enjoyment and stress from more structured, time-consuming projects.

**Student 5**’s green and pink explosions captured homesickness and adaptation: They shared: 'I’m in two places at once—enjoying freedom here but missing home.' This captures the cultural transition they face in adjusting to the course.

Finally, **Student 8**’s spaceman drawing expressed disconnection but boldness: They reflected: 'Pursuing art is bold and exciting but challenging.' Indicating how students are navigating feelings of isolation while embracing the excitement of self-expression.

These reflections demonstrated the complexity of adapting to the course, in both struggles and growth.

1. **Method 3- "Stuckness Methods: Addressing Barriers Through Reflection and Expression"**

The Stuckness Drawing data provided valuable insights into students' creative and emotional blocks through six analysed drawings and verbal reflections. Themes of personal and academic challenges and artistic struggles came up.

**Student 4** illustrated a USB stick, symbolizing engagement with tech, cyber themes and creative block, sharing: “I need to explore new materials; I’m running out of ideas but trying to push myself with new ones.” This highlighted their awareness of limitations and desire to grow with personal challenges. Reflecting a strong desire to overcome barriers despite exhaustion, burnout, and time constraints.

*Similarly, Student 6 reflected on how personal setbacks, like visa delays, disrupted their creative process.*

These opened understanding of how personal and academic challenges intertwine with artistic struggles.

1. **Method Reflections Across Questionnaire**

Across all methods—students provided valuable qualitative insights into their emotional states and sense of community.

While the quantitative survey data only collected 3 respondents feedback across the tutorials, a low response rate. Regardless the feedback was valuable—both photovoice and stuckness methods were rated highly effective in fostering support and inclusion, with 100% of respondents feeling supported, indicating the effectiveness of these methods in supporting students' emotional and artistic growth.

It also highlighted challenges of time constraints in fostering deeper engagement, feedback was mixed, some feeling it was sufficient, while others felt more artistic discussion was needed. Suggesting possibly the students who didn't do advance preparations or the activity introduced later on may have felt disconnected or rushed. Revealing both their sense of belonging and the obstacles they face that can impede it.

1. **Concluding Thoughts and Next Steps: Actionable Steps**

This action research has broadened my understanding of how to foster belonging and inclusion in tutorials. Reiterating the importance of prioritizing clarity, empathy, active participation, and emotional connection, nurturing both creative and personal growth. Yet, belonging is not a passive outcome—it requires deliberate and sustained efforts.

Moving forward with actionable steps, such as incorporating flexible structures like peer feedback groups to enhance emotional and artistic growth might cater for more discussion. Certainly sharing these findings with faculty will advocate for curriculum flexibility, while improving survey response rates will refine future insights.

*Moving forward, there are several key actions:*

*Incorporating alternate -flexible structures and support such as peer feedback groups to enhance connection and reflection, could meet the needs of both emotional and artistic growth within curriculum constraints.*

*Continually to refine breaking tutorials into focused segments that balance creative practice with personal engagement with emotional connection.*

*Additionally, I could introduce incorporating targeted resources like online guides and peer mentors to support students facing challenges such as language barriers or uncertainty to foster stronger connections.*

*Sharing these findings with faculty will allow me to advocate for greater curriculum flexibility, while improving survey response rates will refine future insights.*

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