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## Architects of Belonging: Designing Learning-Centered Classrooms for Equity and Engagement

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### Abstract

Belonging is a critical condition for learning, yet it is often undermined by inequities in access, rigid pedagogy, and exclusionary practices. This paper advances the idea of students and teachers as architects of belonging in learning-centered classrooms. Drawing from theories of inclusive pedagogy, student engagement, and outcomes-based education, it argues that belonging is not incidental but must be intentionally designed through structures, practices, and relationships. The discussion highlights strategies such as co-created learning goals, dialogic feedback, flexible assessment, and peer support systems, demonstrating how they foster a sense of membership, agency, and trust. Ultimately, the paper proposes belonging as both an outcome and a process that sustains equitable and meaningful learning.

**Keywords:** learning-centered classrooms, equity and engagement, architects of belonging

### Introduction

#### Situating the Classroom as a Site of Belonging

Learning environments are both spaces of cognitive development and sites of identity, community, and participation. When students experience exclusion, whether through socioeconomic barriers, cultural misalignment, or pedagogical rigidity, their sense of belonging diminishes, leading to lower motivation and achievement (Thomas & Manalil, 2025; Lemon *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[12, 5]</sup>. Belonging, therefore, is not a peripheral concern but a central condition for learning. Research shows that classrooms designed to foster inclusion and affirmation enable deeper engagement and persistence, especially for students from marginalized groups (Donaldson, 2025) <sup>[3]</sup>. A learning-centered classroom addresses these challenges by positioning belonging as a foundation for intellectual growth. In such spaces, instruction is not confined to content delivery but extends to the cultivation of relational trust, equity of voice, and mutual accountability. Inclusive pedagogical practices such as dialogic teaching, co-created rubrics, and culturally responsive materials signal to students that their perspectives are integral to the learning process (UCLA, 2025). Students are thus not passive recipients of knowledge but active co-creators of the classroom environment, helping to shape its culture, practices, and expectations. This co-construction reflects the principle that learning is social, participatory, and contextual, aligning with broader efforts in higher education to create cultures of belonging that sustain both academic achievement and student wellbeing (Times Higher Education, 2025).

**From OBE to Communities of Inquiry:** Three strands of theory support the framing of classrooms as spaces of belonging:

**Outcomes-Based Education (OBE):** Outcomes-Based Education provides clarity about the competencies students are expected to achieve, giving both learners and educators a shared framework for measuring success. However, clarity alone is insufficient if outcomes are pursued through rigid or exclusionary means. For OBE to be effective, it must be coupled with inclusive practices that recognize differences in student background, ability, and access to resources. When faculty align outcomes with equitable assessments and flexible pathways, they ensure that all learners—not only those with the most advantages—can access and demonstrate the intended competencies. In this way, OBE can function as both a roadmap for achievement and a vehicle for equity.

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### **Communities of Inquiry (CoI)**

The Communities of Inquiry model complements OBE by highlighting the relational and dialogic dimensions of learning. It emphasizes three interdependent forms of presence: cognitive, social, and teaching. Cognitive presence sustains engagement with ideas, social presence fosters connections and trust among peers, and teaching presence organizes and guides the learning process. Belonging is forged at the intersection of these presences. When students feel recognized by their peers and supported by their instructors, they are more likely to invest in the cognitive tasks that build deeper understanding. CoI thus frames belonging not as a secondary benefit but as a structural condition that scaffolds intellectual engagement.

### **Architects of Belonging**

The concept of architects of belonging brings these strands together by recognizing that classrooms are co-constructed spaces. Teachers design the conditions of access, engagement, and assessment, while students contribute agency, cultural knowledge, and peer relationships that animate the classroom ecology. This reciprocal dynamic positions both teachers and students as builders of an environment where learning and belonging reinforce one another. Teachers lay the foundation through inclusive pedagogy and clear expectations, while students extend the structure by creating networks of support and participation. In this framework, belonging is neither accidental nor optional; it is the outcome of intentional design and shared responsibility.

### **Negotiated Belonging in a Learning-Centered Classroom**

Belonging is strengthened when classroom goals, expectations, and practices are negotiated rather than imposed. Learning-centered classrooms invite students to contribute to the definition of success, co-design rubrics, and establish norms for interaction. These practices shift the classroom from a hierarchical model to a participatory one, allowing students to see themselves as valued contributors.

### **Practices that Build Belonging**

#### **Co-Created Learning Goals**

When students and faculty collaborate to refine intended outcomes, learning goals become more than formal requirements written into syllabi. They are reshaped into context-sensitive commitments that reflect the realities and aspirations of the learners themselves. This collaboration strengthens relevance, as students see their personal and cultural contexts recognized in what the classroom defines as success. By turning outcomes into shared commitments, the process reinforces accountability on both sides—teachers commit to making outcomes attainable, while students commit to striving toward them with a stronger sense of ownership.

#### **Dialogic Feedback**

Feedback is most effective when it is framed as an ongoing conversation rather than a one-sided evaluation. Dialogic feedback invites students to reflect on their work, respond to instructor insights, and negotiate possible pathways for improvement. This approach underscores that learning is iterative, built through dialogue and adjustment rather than static judgment. It also affirms student agency, positioning learners as partners in the evaluation process rather than

passive recipients of grades. In this way, feedback becomes a collaborative practice that fosters both growth and belonging.

### **Flexible Assessments**

A learning-centered classroom recognizes that students demonstrate competencies in diverse ways. Providing multiple pathways—such as portfolios, research projects, or oral defenses—allows learners to showcase their strengths while still meeting intended outcomes. Flexible assessments are not about lowering standards but about affirming varied ways of knowing and communicating. They acknowledge that students bring different skills, cultural resources, and learning preferences, and they create space for these differences to enrich classroom practice. This inclusivity strengthens engagement and ensures that assessment is a genuine measure of learning rather than conformity.

### **Peer Support Systems**

Belonging is also cultivated through the relationships students build with one another. Study groups, peer review, and mentoring embed collaboration directly into the fabric of the classroom. These practices extend support beyond instructor-student interactions, creating a web of mutual accountability and encouragement. Peer systems foster resilience, as students who face disruption or difficulty can draw strength from their networks. In moments of crisis, these relationships provide continuity and connection, ensuring that the classroom remains a community of learning rather than a collection of isolated individuals.

### **Belonging as Outcome and Process**

Belonging must be understood both as a (1) learning outcome: a state in which students feel recognized, valued, and connected; and as a (2) process that evolves through continuous interaction. A classroom that nurtures belonging is not static; it adapts to crises, inequities, and shifting student needs. In this sense, belonging is both a goal of education and the condition that makes other goals achievable.

### **Institutional Implications**

Sustaining classrooms as genuine sites of belonging requires more than the goodwill or creativity of individual educators. It demands deliberate and systemic institutional support that addresses both the pedagogical and structural dimensions of learning. Faculty development is essential in this regard. Professional learning opportunities focused on inclusive pedagogy, dialogic assessment, and culturally responsive teaching equip educators with the tools to recognize and address diverse student needs. Such training also helps teachers shift from content-centered approaches to relationship- and equity-centered practices, reinforcing belonging as a pedagogical priority rather than an optional add-on.

Alongside faculty development, investment in learning infrastructure support is equally vital. This includes reliable digital platforms that facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous engagement, accessible learning materials that meet universal design standards, and physical spaces that are safe, inclusive, and conducive to collaboration. Infrastructure in this sense is not limited to technology; it encompasses the entire ecosystem that enables students to participate fully and equitably in the learning process.

Without such institutional provisions, even the most committed teachers face limits in sustaining a pedagogy of belonging, particularly for students marginalized by socioeconomic status, geography, or disability.

Institutional commitment must also be visible in policy and governance. Policies that prioritize equity in assessment, allocate resources for digital inclusion, and protect safe learning environments signal to students that belonging is a collective responsibility. When resources, culture, and policies converge, the classroom is no longer a fragile, teacher-dependent site of belonging but part of a resilient institutional framework. This broader support ensures that the architecture of belonging is not precariously built by individuals alone but embedded into the very structures of higher education.

## Conclusion

Learning-centered classrooms thrive when teachers and students act as architects of belonging, actively shaping the culture and practices that sustain learning. Belonging is built through intentional strategies such as co-created goals, dialogic feedback, flexible assessments, and peer support networks, each of which transforms the classroom into a space of equity, agency, and collaboration. These practices demonstrate that belonging is both an outcome of education and the process that enables other learning outcomes to be achieved.

At the same time, the classroom cannot carry this work alone. Institutional responsibility is critical to embedding belonging within higher education systems. Faculty require professional development in inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and dialogic assessment to sustain practices that value diversity and student voice. Equally important is investment in learning infrastructure support—digital platforms, universally designed materials, and safe physical spaces—that enable all students to participate fully, regardless of their socioeconomic or geographic circumstances. Policies that institutionalize equity in assessment, allocate resources for digital inclusion, and protect safe learning environments extend the architecture of belonging beyond individual classrooms into the governance of education itself.

Framed within the Sustainable Development Goals, these commitments align directly with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by ensuring continuity of learning for all and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by addressing systemic disparities in access and participation. They also connect with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) by advancing inclusive learning technologies, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through the building of responsive, equity-driven educational systems.

Belonging, then, is not a sentimental or purely affective dimension of learning but a structural condition intentionally designed through pedagogy, infrastructure, and institutional policy. When embedded at all levels, belonging becomes the cornerstone of transformative and equitable education: sustaining student achievement, resilience, and engagement in ways that endure beyond the classroom.

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