

BELONGING: AN ACTION LEARNING PROJECT

Background to the Project

In 2006-2007 workshops were coordinated throughout Queensland on the topic of *Belonging*. The workshops were facilitated by Lynda Shevellar from *Community Resource Unit* and Neil Barringham from *A Place To Belong*. This was part of a Disability Services Queensland funded workforce development series to support non-government organizations.

The workshops explored what it means to belong, why belonging is important, the barriers to belonging that exist for people who are marginalized in our society, and how we can assist people to belong. As part of each workshop, Neil and Lynda shared not only their knowledge and experience, but also gathered the collective wisdom of the participants. Workshop participants were invited to weave their individual insights into a framework. Following each workshop the wisdom of the group was collated and added to this document to begin to create a Queensland-wide framework for belonging. The aim of this project is to assist us all – both people with disabilities and the people who assist them – to more fully “belong” to our families, our communities and ourselves.

For these insights we thank the participants at

- Ipswich
- Gold Coast
- Pine Rivers
- Gympie
- Bundaberg
- Logan
- Mackay
- Rockhampton
- Townsville
- Cairns
- Roma
- Toowoomba

An Emerging Framework for Belonging

The framework that emerged from people’s experiences suggested two main strategies. The first is the “where” of the work; where people can find leverage for change. People identified five points of influence to assist both themselves and other people to belong. These five points are summarized in Figure 1.

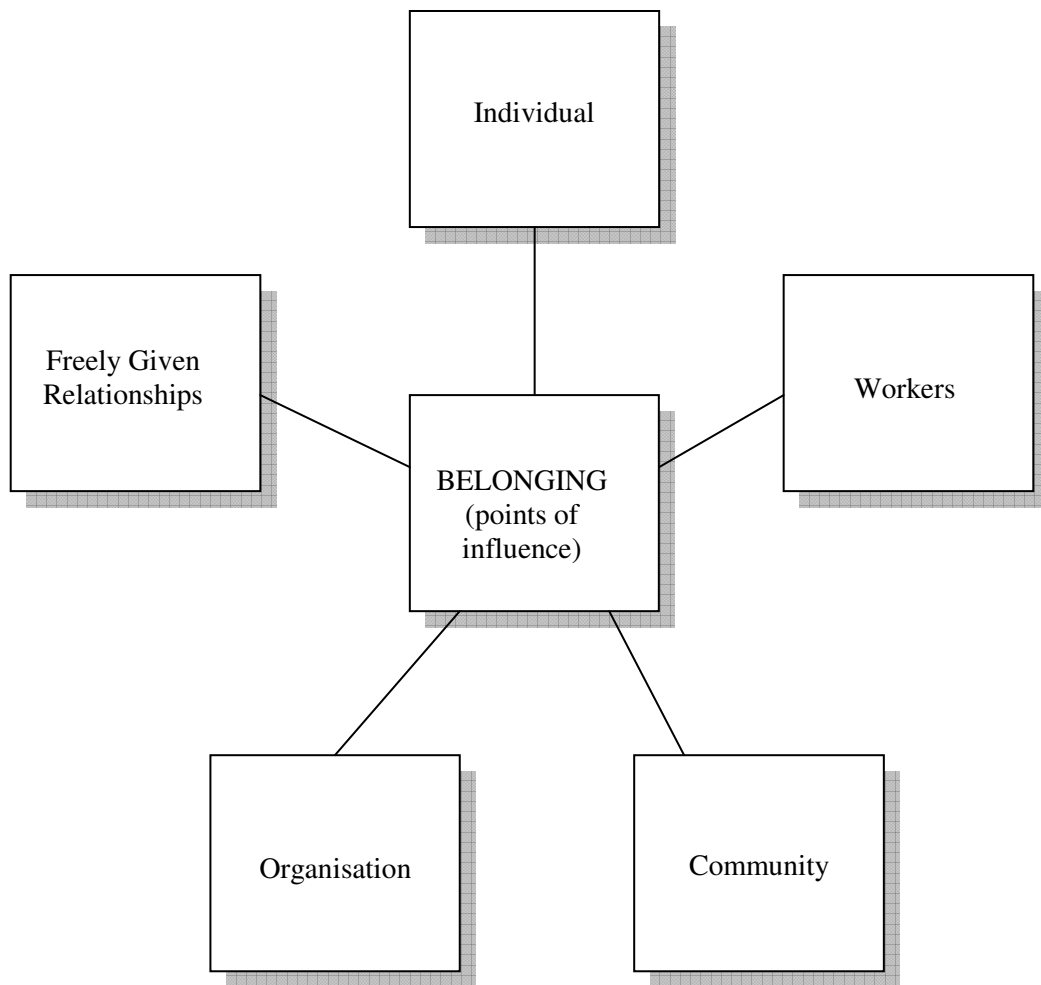


Figure 1. Points of influence in belonging

Influencing belonging at the level of the INDIVIDUAL

- Some of it is “magic” – we need to recognize that we cannot control everything – what we can do is create, recognize and seize upon opportunities, reduce any barriers and make sure we do not obstruct.
- Get to know the person deeply.
- Help people develop individual goals and vision.
- Help people establish and maintain a strong self identity.
- Support the person to develop their confidence.
- Assist people to identify and grow their passions – grow from these life-absorbing activities – needs to be a natural activity to have lasting continuity (as opposed to contrived or artificial).
- Have your own belonging and possessions (e.g., wallet, plants).
- Support people’s mobility and accessibility.
- Strengthen the person’s belonging to themselves.
- Observe people carefully. Watch, for example, where they look or show interest.

- Understand a person's verbal and non-verbal behaviour.
- Understand and acknowledge a person's fears.
- Work on a person's image and presentation.
- Having valued roles.
- Helping people value themselves.
- Identify barriers. Know how someone belongs (e.g., in crowds, in one-to-one situations, in structured and formal activities, or in highly spontaneous environments).
- Promote self-esteem and self-confidence.

Influencing belonging at the level of FREELY GIVEN (UNPAID) RELATIONSHIPS

- Support existing relationships.
- Seek input from the person's family and involve families in planning.
- Foster/facilitate visits of family and friends.
- Assist people to have regular relationships, for example, how can you support their family, partner, marriage, children.
- Support independence and ownership through developing skills, such as arts and performance as well as "life skills".
- Social networking.
- Finding out an individual's interests and social networks.
- Facilitate opportunities for developing friendships.
- Talk to the people involved in the person's life.

Influencing belonging at the level of COMMUNITY

- Accessing the local community. Look to generic activities; look outside the disability square.
- Reclaiming public spaces.
- Joining clubs and classes.
- Volunteer work.
- Think about how people can contribute to their community, not merely receive.
- Move out of the disability "ghetto". Look to generic services and ordinary (not disability specific) activities.
- Neighbourhood participation.
- Make use of the "third" space, the space which is not home or work (e.g., parks, shops, gathering and meeting places).
- Facilitate other people's comfort.
- Recognise people's contributions and value their participation.
- Use mediating organizations.
- Find the open places and "open times".
- Encourage the person to participate by joining a sporting/personal interest/social group which could lead to friendships.
- Find common interests.
- Knowledge of the community.
- Create and watch for "patterns". Become a regular, watch for other "regulars", frequent the same places so you start to have more presence.
- "Sniff around" (i.e., keep on the lookout for opportunities).
- "Get out there".
- Help others feel welcome when you are with the person.

Influencing belonging at the level of the WORKER

- Listen with your whole self – listen with your heart.
- Take time.
- Know the person not the disability.
- Look for abilities rather than disabilities and concentrate on these.
- What is your first step? Where are you going? What is the goal of what you are doing? Think ends and means, not activity for activity's sake, but activity that will lead to relationship and connection.
- Know when to step back and let the person take control.
- Listen for “behavioural whispers” and watch for cues, try and catch things before they escalate.
- Trust.
- Observation and communication.
- Someone knows me! That means, for example, get to know about the person; their values; walk together; walk alongside the person.
- Everyone is an individual.
- Role reversal – when the learner becomes the teacher and the teacher becomes the learner. (This was shared as a great way of developing skills.)
- Workers should share and be open.
- Sharing many things – thoughts, activities, meals, friendships, ideas, interests, a joke, a moment.
- Invite people into our own lives.
- Find the people who are open, the group members who are willing to learn.
- Bring in other people, including our own activities.
- Reflecting on our own (social) access will help us to support social access for others.
- Knowing when to fade support.
- Ask questions.
- Set up opportunities.
- Review what you do – recognize the client's achievements.
- Renew, reflect, value, remind and recycle.
- Build a rapport between worker and client.
- Know your own strengths.
- Develop empathy with the people you support.
- (Work with) peer support.
- Work out the appropriate role for you.
- Be active in facilitating meetings.
- Bring yourself by being present in the work.
- Work developmentally (step-by-step).
- Work with laughter and a sense of fun.
- Role modeling.
- Trial and error.
- Have patience – wait and watch; slow down; take more time.
- Take a developmental approach to learning. Grow things step-by-step to grow confidence and reduce fears.
- Just do it! Feel the fear and do it anyway!
- Real, meaningful outcomes.
- Meaningful plans based on what works and what is important.
- Choice through knowledge.
- Goals, both large and small.

- Respect people's choices.
- Stand up for people; believe in their dreams.
- Take small steps at a time.
- Facilitate the person's comfort in the environment.
- Assist people to find "work;" either paid work or other ways of making a contribution to society.
- Don't take ownership of outcomes.
- Slowly withdraw and fade.
- Go by intuition.
- Be enthusiastic.
- Value our own role.
- Be adventurous.

Influencing belonging at the level of ORGANISATIONS AND SERVICES

- Have a positive attitude, empathy and flexibility. Also employ workers with these qualities.
- Plan and organize.
- Provide flexible support (e.g., be willing to change rosters and shifts, try new things, work the service around the needs of the person rather than the person around the needs of the service). Instead of asking "Is it possible?" begin to ask the question "What will it take?"
- Match clients and support staff carefully in terms of age, gender, energy, interests or attitude.
- Challenge existing organizational practices.
- Drive new organizations practices. Support a culture of (constructive) critique and learning in the organization. Constantly imagine how things might be improved.
- Appeal up the ladder to gain support for the vision.
- Ask the hard questions of the services in the person's life.

What Do We Do To Facilitate Belonging?

In addition to the "where" of the work, is the "how" of the work. People identified seven broad actions that they have found useful to help others to gain a sense of belonging.

Listening

- Getting to know the person deeply.
- Recognising the person's gifts and qualities.
- Assisting people to identify their passions.
- Observing the tiniest glimmers of potential.
- Listening for the hopes, dreams ideas and agendas that come from the person.
- Identifying the person's networks.
- Looking for abilities, not just disabilities.
- Developing understanding of the person's behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal.
- Taking time to get to know the person.
- Reflecting on our own social access to help us to support someone else's access.
- Understand the person's capacities and limitations.
- Put yourself in the person's shoes.

- Be suspicious of what is really going on. Do not be satisfied with superficial assessments of what is happening for the person.
- Learn from the person's story.

Planning

- Planning *with* the person.
- Helping the person develop visions and goals.
- Considering how people can contribute.
- Planning first steps.
- Thinking outside the square.
- Having high hopes.
- Considering valued roles.
- Identify barriers and difficulties.
- Normalise challenges.
- Be aware of facilities available.
- It is OK for people to change their minds.
- 60% planning – 40% doing.

Supporting

- Supporting the person to develop self-confidence and strong self-identity.
- Supporting the person to have possessions and belongings.
- Supporting the person's mobility and accessibility.
- Supporting the person to develop skills that will be helpful.
- Implementing strategies to assist communication.
- Supporting participation with others.
- Practising.
- Assisting the person to have regular relationships.
- Believing in the person's dreams.
- Assisting the person to
- Creating an environment where it is OK to take risks and make mistakes.
- Role modeling.

Networking

- Working with moments of openness.
- Connecting to passionate people in the community.
- Seeking input from the person's family.
- Creating an open space for things to occur.
- Experimenting – trying many things.
- Getting out there.
- Talking to the people involved in the person's life.
- Seizing opportunities.
- Reducing barriers.
- Affirming and supporting existing relationships.
- Fostering and facilitating family contacts.
- Accessing local community networks.
- Reclaiming public space.
- Accessing mediating organizations.

- Finding open spaces, open people, open times.
- Building your knowledge of the local community.
- Inviting people in.
- Asking.
- Searching around the local community.
- Finding a meaningful role.
- Working with your own networks.
- Approaching the gate-keepers and power brokers in a group.
- Working with the unplanned; supporting the accidental.
- Finding someone already embedded in the context and approaching them.
- Joining clubs and classes, doing volunteer work.
- Moving out of the disability ghetto and looking for ordinary activities.
- Encouraging and supporting positive roles the person has.
- Looking for “normal” experiences e.g. dog walking with others.
- Take risks for the person and/or for you.

Validating

- “Praising the crap out of the person.”
- Being positive.
- Holding positive assumptions.
- Celebrating.
- Validating the person’s ideas.
- Looking for exceptions – when did the person do well?
- Standing up for people – believing in their dreams.
- Working with what is valuable and important to the person.

Safeguarding

- Supporting a culture of critique and development.
- Challenging unhelpful organisational practices.
- Matching clients and support staff well.
- Making sure we don’t get in the way.
- Employing workers who will have a vision.
- Flexing – on shifts, times, etc.

Persevering

- “Just bothering.”
- Having patience and de
- Having courage.
- Going beyond the call of duty.
- Asking not “is it possible?” but “what will it take?”
- Taking a long term view.
- Knowing when to step back and fade.
- Being consistent –
- Taking a developmental approach.
- Not accepting defeat.