DARLENE MCLENNAN: Afternoon everybody. Thanks for joining us. Fabulous to have you all here. It's been great to see the amount of interest in our symposium. And I hope you who were able to join the keynote previously enjoyed the words of Sheryl. Amazing to have her. What a coup for us! Okay. Today's session, Why Disrupt ‑ Using UDL to Foster Belonging and Break Down Barriers is our presentation and for those who don't know me, my name is Darlene McLennan. My pronouns are she and her. And I'm the Manager of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training.

We have captions ‑ we've turned on the automatic captions in Zoom. We actually haven't been able to get the closed captions working from Bradley Reporting, but we do have it in a 1cap in a browser, so we will post that 1cap link into the chat now and you can access the captions in the browser if you would prefer to access the captions there and we will continue to do that throughout the session.

We are recording, so feel free to turn off your video if you don't want to be recorded or leave them on, it's up to you. We have a chat and Q&A function, and please feel free to chat to each other but if you have some questions for the end of the session, please add it to the Q&A box. And I think that's about it. But we will also put a link in the browser about our poster presentations that you can access throughout the afternoon and tomorrow as well. Okay. Now I'm going to hand over to Samantha Poulos. We do have two other named presenters here that won't be talking but they're there on the screens, Sarah and Ella, but Samantha is going to do all the talking. So I will hand over to you, Samantha. Thank you so much.

DR SAMANTHA POULOS: Thank you so much, Darlene. Hi everyone. Good afternoon. So my name is Samantha Poulos, I'm from the University of Sydney, and the paper that I'm presenting today has been written in collaboration with Ella Collins‑White and Sarah Humphreys, so their names are here and they're in the chat as well, if you would like to speak with them. So as we get started today, I would firstly ‑ actually, before I forget these things about the session, use the chat functions ‑ these are going to be the standard on every slide you see today, and I think Darlene's just been over this.

So what I wanted to start with is an acknowledgement of country, and I wanted to acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land on which the University of Sydney is built. It is the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. So I pay respects to their Elders past and present and to any First Nations people in attendance. As we share our knowledge, teaching, learning and research practices within this space, may we also pay respect to the knowledge embedded forever within the Aboriginal custodianship of country. So I'm currently presenting this work to you from Gadigal land ‑ I'm in Ultimo ‑ and it is on this land that this paper was written and was worked on. The University of Sydney is built on unceded land of the Gadigal people, and this is something I want you to keep in mind as I discuss the importance of developing a sense of belonging on a University campus and the ways in which space and place can hinder a sense of belonging for all of our students.

So to give an overview of what I will be covering today, I want to explore the why of UDL by considering the value of a sense of belonging to a student's experience at University. So the language of UDL allows us to ask many why questions and to interrogate the barriers in the learning environment that may prohibit a sense of belonging. Academic achievement is important, as we all know, but some people in our team, who are actually in this meeting today as well, have been doing research on transition units and thinking about what is also important to students. And it turns out a sense of belonging, you know, it's also incredibly strongly related to students' overall experiences at University. So students who feel like they belong have a better tertiary experience. Knowing this, we can then ask what impacts a sense of belonging in the learning environment of the University of Sydney. So I will be talking specifically about my context, but what I would like you all to think is what kind of things are happening in your educational space, in your tertiary education spaces, what kind of barriers exist to this sense of belonging, and not only that, but why is it important to perhaps change it, to disrupt these long-held mindsets. The ones that we face at the University of Sydney is a really long held mindset of prestige, a sense of exclusivity and this concept of being a sandstone University. So this is the why; why are we trying to disrupt this?

So asking these questions, you know, allows us to say why should we actually use UDL? Belonging may be a huge buzz word but it's important to emphasise that belonging is an extremely important part of people being able to engage in and with a space. So extrapolating from some psychology of physical space ‑ quote/unquote ‑ I put some words at the end ‑ the more people satisfied with public spaces to which they have access, the more that they feel that they belong in the community. So our educational and innovational colleagues have been working for a while looking at these transition units and the link between belonging and success at University. So the slide that you are seeing now shows some of their findings.

What we see plotted here is a weighted average grade of students and the student experience survey of 2022, looking at the overall quality of educational experience. So obviously, as we can see, academic achievement is important to students' sense of overall experience but we can also see that belonging is closely associated with the rating of the overall quality of their educational experiences. So what we are getting from this is that grades alone do not create a quality experience.

A key goal of UDL is that it seeks to creates environments where all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities. So extrapolating from this graph, we can suggest then that facilitating academic success alone is not the only goal when creating a meaningful learning opportunity. UDL's goal of designing for learner variability and the idea that there is no average student when it comes to learning gives us then the language to ground any initiatives that focus on belonging. There is no average student when it comes to learning, there is no average student when it comes to belonging. It is these kinds of experiences that we need to be thinking about. And if we can know then that all learners benefit from a sense of belonging and this will help build towards a learner who is purposeful, who is motivated, and also that their experience at University is not solely dependent on their grades.

So why use UDL to help develop a sense of belonging? Well, fundamentally, as we all know, UDL is about changing systems, not the students. We can't make a student feel like they belong but we can change systems, we can change learning environments to be more thoughtful and inclusive to deliberately work towards this idea of belonging.

To put some more quotes on the board, a learning environment "comprises the psychological, social, cultural, and physical setting in which learning occurs and which experiences and expectations are co‑created amongst its participants". So the co‑creators of a learning environment could be students, academics, staff members, and all of this takes place within a physical setting that consists of various cultural and administrative norms. So it's important to consider all of these elements of a learning environment as it shows us what barriers can emerge in the environment and the things that we are possibly able to control.

So Rusticus et al, who I have quoted here, also identified in their research that "having a sense of belonging was a key feature of the environment and discussions around a sense of community or lack thereof", and it was a prominent theme in the students they interviewed. So belonging was specifically noted as something that is important to students, but also something that can be hindered by the learning environment. Further to that, if we think then that students should be considered and are considered as co‑creators of a learning environment, as the definition provided, it reinforces the need for them to feel part of and in control of shaping their learning environment. And this is why the barriers these institutions can identify, such as the physical representational cultural norms, the systems, all of these parts that we control, are something we can address to facilitate students to engage further as co‑creators. So if they feel like they belong, it's not just a matter of us saying, "Well, you're here, you belong now." It's, "Well, how can we actually co‑create that sense of belonging?" What is in our power to meet them halfway and give the students the opportunity to co‑create with us.

As many of you know ‑ or at least I'm assuming everyone knows ‑ the University of Sydney has quite the reputation. We are known ‑ we are what is known as a sandstone University, so this is a term that reflects the building material ‑ a lot of our buildings are made out of sandstone ‑ but it also refers to a certain sect of Universities in Australia that were some of the first. So along with this sandstone reputation ‑ and we can also use the term "sandstone" to mean here immovable ‑ are created through layers of heritage, a cultivated sense of prestige really embedded in the buildings. There's a lot of barriers in the elements of the learning environment that prevent a sense of belonging. So obviously belonging is a social thing. We feel like we belong when we're with people who have shared values and shared experiences. However, it also relates to the physical environment and the cultural norms embedded in them. In a place where social capital and prestige is embedded in the buildings, you know, I think many of you might automatically think of the quadrangle building which looks like Hogwarts when we mention the University of Sydney. So it's an inescapable part of the landscape of campus. And here is also where we can consider the barriers that students face. If we are to consider them as co‑creators of their learning environment but a physical space of campus is so rigid and so many of the buildings are embedded and imbued with inaccessibility ‑ not only physical inaccessibility but now think of the colonial histories particularly that we face at University of Sydney ‑ so this is where I would like us to return back to this acknowledgement of country and we think what does it mean to have a University with strategic plans to create exclusive spaces for indigenous students but not consider renaming buildings that are named after colonists, or acknowledging that the very sandstone of our reputation of our buildings was stolen materials from Gadigal burial lands? So these are things we need to think about with the buildings.

In a study on the sense of belonging amongst students of low socio‑economic students in higher education, Trawalter et al argued that "space and public space in particular is central to a democracy and a sense of belonging in one's community", so we know, therefore, that the physical environment plays an enormous role in belonging. Further to that "ambient belonging, we argue, can be ascertained rapidly and even from a cursory glance at a few objects". What this means is that a sense of belonging is not something that has to be actively cultivated. Ambient belonging is something we develop assigns and signifiers that we pick up on in a space and each student may be picking up on different unconscious signs and signifiers around them.

So some students may not notice them at all, but these signs could be drastically unsettling to others. A cursory glance around our campus, and perhaps you can think to your own campus, think about the learning environment and the expectations that they cultivate and the ambient sense of belonging around. At USYD we tend to have this ambient belonging of prestige. You know, we have our sandstone buildings, we have, you know, crests embedded on some of our buildings, but also here is a couple of photos that I took on campus yesterday. We've got a bunch of signs up at the moment saying we're now top 20 in the world, referring to our rankings. We've got a very large initiative of our promotional material focusing on our ranking, on our global ranking. So it's not just the way that USYD leverages history and legacy as part of its reputation, it's also the way that it promotes its present reputation. So this is something for you to think about. What promotional materials are being put up around campus and how these reflect but also cultivate the most current values of a University. These are not just ambient signs of belonging or ambient cues to pick up on; these are now actively cultivated.

So if we can think about all these signs and signifiers and how they affect students differently, if a student is already wary of coming to University or feeling, perhaps, that they have achieved something by getting in but maybe they are not really satisfied or that they belong, coming in here and seeing these markers, these are actively cultivated barriers to belonging. They may have been constructed with the intention to celebrate reputation and perpetuate this sense of prestige and inclusive to suggest that the student, you know, congratulations, you made it, you've got into this great University, but they also can come across as exclusionary.

Research shows us that Universities are becoming more inclusive and more diverse than ever before and we have more voices and perspectives present at all levels in the institution. However, this does not mean that Universities are utopias of inclusion and belonging. Hills et al in their work identify several of the challenges of fostering a culture of inclusive learning at higher education. And this is one of the major barriers I would say that we face at USYD. We have a paradox in our expectation of developing a culture of inclusive learning while also celebrating and promoting our exclusiveness. What we do in the classroom and our teaching practice is one thing, but the learning environment encompasses much more than that. All of this, you know, is sort of to say that this is why we should be asking why; the very question of why disrupts. It forces reflection, it forces us to face the unspoken, why do we do things the way that we do, why are things the way that they are, why do we as an institution place value where we place it? And ultimately, to wrap things up, I would like to say that UDL gives us the framework to position these why questions. These ambient signs of belonging, the hidden curriculums and expectations that students, you know, might not know that they need to know when they get to a tertiary education, preconceived notions of a learning environment and how we assume that students have been involved, perhaps thinking, you know, you can change the way a classroom is set up. Students can say, "Actually, I would like to face this way", you can change that. But you can't perhaps change that the building itself is named after a colonist and that might make some students feel uncomfortable.

So all of these things, is all coming together in the learning environment and we should always be asking why. Why are things the way that they are? Why do we perhaps perpetuate them, whether knowingly or unknowingly? So before we can ask what and how, I really think it's really important to ask why?

And so the last point that I just wanted to make is that I think we can connect these questions that I've been asking why of our University and of my context to any University and any tertiary context. Think about where you are. Think about why are things the way that they are? And why not change them? Thank you. I hope you found this talk helpful to reflect on your own conference. Always continue asking why, always be out there disrupting. This is me, this is my email address. I will put it in the chat. This paper was written in collaboration with Ella Collins‑White and Sarah Humphreys. Ella will be presenting in the Thursday part of this conference, so please come along to her workshop as well. And there we go. Time for any questions? Thank you.

DARLENE: That's fabulous. Thank you, Samantha, that's brilliant. If people have any questions for Samantha, if you could add that to the Q&A box, that's kind of where I will be facilitating the questions. It was great to see so many, yeah, chat as well in the chat box. So I will just give it a couple of seconds for people to put their question in.

While I'm doing that, I've also just added a link to our poster presentations. You will see from the different variety of sessions we've got, we tried to be UDL in our focus. So we've got workshops, facilitated sessions, meetings, and so forth, and poster presentations. So we've kind of a whole swathe of information. So any questions for Samantha? Or feel free to put your hand up, if you want to, if you don't want to type in the Q&A box. Happy to unmute you and have you ask a question, if you would like? It's been interesting for me, the word "belonging" has been a big thing this week. There's been quite a few articles written, so it's great to see some of the research work being done in this space. So it's very exciting.

SAMANTHA: I will stop sharing my screen.

DARLENE: Now I have the Q&A. Excellent. So Rae has asked what are some of the great examples of inclusive imagery you have seen at University of Sydney or other locations?

SAMANTHA: Yeah. So USYD recently has actually spent quite a lot of money collaborates with indigenous identified artists to bring some artwork on to campus and really create a space that is thoughtful in that way. But not to be a downer on that side as well, because I feel like this talk has been very sledging on the campus of USYD but I've actually spoken to indigenous students that I've taught, and one of the artworks that the University commissioned and produced actually rather than being a garden that was supposed to represent, you know, a transient garden of indigenous natives, all of the plants that they planted were not native to Gadigal land. They chose plants from all other parts of Australia.

So it's just interesting to think, you know, this combination there of inclusive imagery, even with the images I showed on campus, the promotional images were mostly of women. There was women of colour represented in there, it wasn't just white men. So it's that thoughtfulness that's clearly going into these promotional images but there is always something else that could be done, there is always something else that we could perhaps be picking up on.

DARLENE: Excellent. Well, there's quite a few questions coming in. I will take the ones from the upvote. So do you come across a lot of ‑ this is from Lucy ‑ do you come across a lot of opposition of trying to create this sense of belonging, particularly from any legacy academics, et cetera?

SAMANTHA: From my personal experience I would say yes. I don't work directly with the transition initiatives, which is where our academics and many of our staff are from here today. I work quite directly with our academics to say, you know, "These are first‑year units. Students need to feel like they belong. Here are some initiatives that we can do." But in my experience as a tutor trying to teach, certainly there is an expectation that, "Well, actually, everyone should be lucky that they're here. You know, they're here. Why do they need to think about belonging? We all made it. Welcome to USYD, we're all a community."

And I think this is true of any institution. Anything that you have to apply to get into, there is kind of the expectation that once you get in you should automatically feel like you belong. And I don't think that's just a heritage thing. I think that's the ‑ any tertiary education.

DARLENE: That's brilliant. Another question was how you approach working with academic colleagues who perhaps reject that inclusion is part of their job or a key part of Universities in current times?

SAMANTHA: Yeah. I mean, I think that's the tough one. I think that's going to be, perhaps, the question of the conference, thinking of how do we get other people on board with us. But I think just starting a conversation. A lot of this stuff I would say goes unspoken. And this is why I always think to ask why, because our academics are asking us why; why should I care about this, why does it matter, why should I put captions, perhaps. But just asking why forces us to think, well, why not? Why do you do them without? Actually, I will pass over to Sarah who has got her hand up as well. Sarah wants to jump in. Thank you.

SARAH HUMPHREYS: Yeah, thanks, Sam, and thank you for that question. I think often what you'll find in the literature around UDL implementation is a suggestion that you start where you know you're going to have most success. And often the phrase work with your low hanging fruit, and as Sam said, really the flavour of the conference, when you get to the why ‑ and I really do encourage you to join Ella's workshop on Thursday at 12 o'clock because that will really unpack the process that we've been using at the University of Sydney to try and make UDL implementation more doable, and to help people manage with the busy workloads being time poor. And I'm sure ‑ you've got Thomas Tobin speaking on Thursday as well around his +1 approach. That's something that we've very much taken on board as well. So we're really being led by our academics in terms of how much they can take on at any point in time, and supporting them through that process.

DARLENE: That's great. Just two more questions left but we're running out of time. So just from Andy, what are your thoughts on "you got in so you automatically belong. So why do we need to help you feel like you belong?" When we also operate in contexts where some admission pathways are marked as signifiers of not belonging. Great one, Andy.

SAMANTHA: And think that's ‑ yeah, that's exactly the issue. If the idea is that you got in, therefore you already belong, but we know that we have admission pathways to help other people get in who perhaps don't have things like an ATAR mark or this level of exclusivity. It's just ‑ I don't ‑ I mean, I don't have an answer to it but I think my thoughts on it is just that it's very difficult. It's very difficult to say to someone automatically, "You got in, you belong." As I mentioned earlier, if we think that, you know, learning is not individual for ‑ every student learns individually and there's no average student when it comes to learning, then there's no average person when it comes to belonging. Just because they get into a place or just because we're all in the same place ‑ even in a workplace, yes, you feel like you belong because you got hired at the same job, but that doesn't automatically make you feel like you belong. This is why we need to think about ‑ yes, Maureen has put in the chat imposter syndrome. If we are all carrying that around, that's why I think we need to think about what actually makes belonging and then not just the social part of it but what elements around that. Because it can't be enough to say you got in, be there, thank you. It's got to be more than that, yeah.

DARLENE: Definitely. And there was just a question just in regards to ‑ Kathleen, forgive my ignorance but did you say the uni has a history of being male‑only originally. So I was hoping someone would answer that, but yeah.

SAMANTHA: I didn't say it but we definitely do.

DARLENE: Okay.

SAMANTHA: Classic ‑ I'm pretty sure we were the first ‑ either us or Melbourne. I'm not remembering my dates correctly but it definitely was men only. And some facts about the quadrangle, actually, that you may not know, the inside of the quadrangle building, the inside facing of it, half of it is modelled on Oxford and the other half is modelled on Cambridge. So it's very deliberately modelled to look like the most exclusive Universities in England, reproduced here in Australia with kangaroos on the outside. So if you ever come to the University campus, take a tour around the outside. We've got some really interesting Australian native animals as gargoyles but it's this very interesting, yeah, creation of a building that's not only been like we're exclusive, but being like we're deliberately drawing from some of the most exclusive institutions in the world, or in England specifically …

DARLENE: Yeah

SAMANTHA: … yeah, and reproducing them.

DARLENE: That's amazing. All right. We're going to have to end. We've not left much time between each session, so thank you so much, Samantha, for your presentation, and to Ella and to Sarah for being there in the background. It's absolutely brilliant. I invite you all to go back to the lobby and go to your next session. I may see some of you in that. It's fabulous. It's a great afternoon and I look forward to some more great conversations. Take care, everybody.

SAMANTHA: Thank you so much, everyone.