

PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLES

From Adler to Allen: How Theories of Belonging Shape Online Graduate Education for Social Workers

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Belonging is a fundamental human need critically linked to student motivation, well-being, and academic success in online graduate education. This article presents a narrative review that explores the theoretical and practical applications of Alfred Adler's concept of social interest (Gemeinschaftsgefühl) and Kelly-Ann Allen's contemporary model of belonging in online graduate social work education. In the wake of increased virtualization of education, the analysis synthesizes recent empirical evidence to examine the unique challenges of fostering connection in asynchronous and synchronous digital learning environments, particularly for a discipline rooted in relational practice and empathic engagement. The analysis demonstrates a robust alignment between Adlerian principles of community feeling, encouragement, and purpose and Allen's four-pillar framework (relationships, competence, autonomy, and meaning). Integrating these theories provides a comprehensive, evidence-informed foundation for designing online pedagogy that is both psychologically attuned and pedagogically effective. The article concludes with a series of actionable, evidence-based strategies for educators and institutions to cultivate inclusive, supportive, and engaging online communities. These strategies are designed to mitigate the acute sense of isolation reported in digital learning spaces and promote the development of competent, resilient, and ethically grounded social work professionals prepared for contemporary practice.

Belonging is a fundamental human need that plays a vital role in shaping an individual's motivation, emotional well-being, engagement, and overall success, particularly in online graduate education settings (Allen et al., 2022; Pyne et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). A sense of belonging contributes significantly to students' ability to persist through academic and personal challenges, connect authentically with peers and instructors, and develop a strong, integrated sense of professional identity within their chosen field (Strayhorn, 2019). Given that social work is fundamentally anchored in empathy, human connection, and relational dynamics, the imperative for cultivating belonging in online graduate education in this field is not merely beneficial but constitutes an integral and non-negotiable aspect of the educational framework (O'Brien et al., 2023; Zeman & Swanke, 2023).

The inherent lack of spontaneous interpersonal interactions and informal support networks in virtual education contributes to an increased sense of isolation and disconnection among students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011;

Kumar et al., 2024), a stark contrast to the embodied community often found in traditional face-to-face learning environments. These challenges are further amplified and critically important in the field of social work, where students are consistently engaged with emotionally intense subject matter, complex ethical dilemmas, and narratives from vulnerable populations. Consequently, cultivating a durable sense of belonging within online graduate programs requires systematic, theoretically grounded, and sustained efforts from both educators and institutions to establish inclusive, cohesive, and emotionally supportive academic communities (Gettings & Mika, 2025; Thompson & Bishop, 2022). This article draws upon both Adler's and Allen's theoretical contributions to critically examine the multifaceted role of belonging in online graduate social work education.

This narrative review will examine current and emerging empirical research on belonging in digital learning spaces, identify the unique psychosocial and educational needs of graduate social work students, and present a synthesized framework of evidence-based strategies for enhancing connection, engagement, and professional identity formation in virtual classrooms. By integrating foundational theory with practical application and contemporary research, this discussion aims to provide a comprehensive guide for educators, instructional designers, and program administrators committed to creating more inclusive, responsive, and relationally rich online environments where social work students can thrive both academically and personally.

Theoretical Framework: Adler and Allen on Belonging

The works of Alfred Adler and Kelly-Ann Allen provide complementary and robust theoretical lenses for understanding the construct of belonging. While Adler provides the foundational, humanistic why, Allen offers a structured, operationalized how for educational settings. The following table provides a comparative overview of their key concepts, illustrating their synergistic potential.

Review of Literature

The Importance and Challenges of Belonging in Online Social Work Education

Social work is an interdisciplinary field that is fundamentally anchored in principles of relational engagement, ethical accountability, and facilitating meaningful, culturally responsive connections with individuals, families, and communities (Islam, 2024; National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Effective practice demands not only cognitive and technical competence but also well-developed interpersonal skills such as empathy, collaboration, emotional attunement, and self-reflection (Rogers & Welch, 2022). As such, graduate education in social work must cultivate a strong foundation in relational practice from the earliest stages of training, a process traditionally nurtured through in-person dialogue, observation, and supervised practice. This imperative becomes increasingly complex and pedagogically challenging

Fig 1.

Aspect	Alfred Adler (Individual Psychology)	Kelly-Ann Allen (Educational Psychology)
Core Concept	<i>Gemeinschaftsgefühl</i> (Social Interest/Community Feeling): An innate drive for social connectedness and purposeful contribution to the community (Adler, 1938).	Belonging: A dynamic, multidimensional process actively cultivated through intentional institutional practices (Allen & Kern, 2017).
Key Principles	1. Community Feeling: Psychological well-being is inextricably tied to feeling embedded in a social context and contributing to the common good. 2. Encouragement: Affirming effort, progress, and inherent worth to build resilience and counter feelings of inferiority. 3. Purpose & Contribution: Individuals thrive when they perceive their actions as socially meaningful and purposeful.	The Four Pillars (Allen & Kern, 2019): 1. Relationships: Positive, supportive connections with peers, instructors, and the institution. 2. Competence: Belief in one's ability to succeed academically and master course material. 3. Autonomy: Perception of control, choice, and agency over one's learning journey. 4. Meaning: Education is experienced as relevant to personal values, identity, and long-term goals.
View of Belonging	A foundational psychological need and an educational imperative for motivation and mental health. A prerequisite for overcoming life tasks.	A systemic outcome and a state of being, requiring intentional design across the entire educational environment. It is both a process and a product.
Relevance to Online SW Education	Explains the profound psychological impact of isolation and provides a philosophical base for intentionally building community, purpose, and mutual aid in virtual spaces.	Offers a practical, evidence-based, and multidimensional framework for designing curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student support services to foster inclusion and engagement.

in online learning environments, where students face heightened risks of social disconnection, diminished emotional engagement, and limited opportunities for the spontaneous experiential learning that occurs in physical educational settings (Cesari et al., 2021; Thompson & Bishop, 2022). Given these challenges, fostering a strong and resilient sense of belonging within virtual social work programs is not only beneficial but also essential for preparing competent, resilient, and socially responsive practitioners who can navigate the complexities of modern practice (Zeman & Swanke, 2023).

While online education offers unparalleled flexibility and access for non-traditional students, it also presents significant and well-documented barriers to relational learning and the development of a cohesive student identity (Kumar et al., 2024). These barriers are especially pronounced in social work education, where connection, critical reflection, and a sense of community are foundational to the field's ethos. Digital learning environments frequently lack the spontaneous, corridor conversations and informal support networks that organically develop among students in campus settings, which are crucial for processing difficult content and building camaraderie (Bevens et al., 2024). A large-scale nationwide survey involving tens of thousands of students revealed that those participating in online learning, especially students with disabilities and those from underrepresented groups, reported markedly higher levels of loneliness and perceived isolation (Bevens et al., 2024; Stone & Springer, 2019). These findings underscore the persistent deficits in social connectedness and support mechanisms within online learning environments compared to traditional in-person education. This gap can directly impact academic performance and mental health.

Furthermore, asynchronous discussion forums, while a staple of online pedagogy for promoting reflective thinking, often lack the immediacy, emotional resonance, and dynamic interplay of face-to-face conversations,

which can limit opportunities for deep peer learning, collaborative problem-solving, and the development of trust (Rovai, 2002; Wise et al., 2022). The absence of nonverbal cues—such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions—which are essential for conveying empathy, building trust, and resolving misunderstandings, remains a persistent concern in text-based and even video-based online communication (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Reamer, 2023). This can create a significant hurdle for social work students learning to attune to clients' emotional states.

Addressing Challenges Through Theoretical Integration

A theoretical integration of Alfred Adler's concept of *social interest* and Kelly-Ann Allen's four-pillar model of belonging offers a valuable, multi-level framework for addressing these challenges in a systematic and pedagogically grounded manner. Adler's principle that psychological health is fundamentally tied to an individual's sense of connectedness and purpose within their social environment (Adler, 1938; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) directly applies to the designed social environment of online learning. Here, educational experiences must be intentionally crafted to foster inclusion, contribution, and encouragement, rather than assumed to occur naturally. For instance, personalized and affirming feedback from instructors reinforces students' sense of competence and value within the learning community, directly aligning with Adler's focus on encouragement as a catalyst for growth and resilience (Conklin et al., 2020). Recent research by Porter and Bozkaya (2020) found that incorporating live interactions and timely, personalized feedback into self-paced online professional development programs significantly enhanced learner persistence, increased course completion rates, and improved engagement with supplemental assignments, with results backed by strong statistical significance.

Similarly, cohort-based program structures are a practical application of Adlerian social interest, as they support consistent peer interaction, mutual aid, and the development of a collective professional identity (Ruff, 2021). Ruff (2021) emphasized that the concept of social belonging aligns closely with Adlerian constructs of social interest and encouragement, both of which serve as fundamental mechanisms underpinning the development of motivation and psychological resilience. Online educational programs that intentionally foster small, supportive communities may effectively replicate the campus integration processes that are critical for student success, particularly for those balancing studies with parenting and employment (Ruff, 2021; Thompson & Bishop, 2022).

Allen's (2019) model provides a complementary, structured approach for operationalizing these Adlerian ideals. The relationships pillar is brought to life through deliberately facilitated peer mentoring programs, structured small-group activities, and proactive faculty engagement, all of which are critical predictors of students' sense of belonging and persistence in virtual learning environments (Hammond, 2020; Kumar et al., 2024). The competence pillar is supported through carefully scaffolded learning

sequences, transparent rubrics with clear performance expectations, and low-stakes, mastery-based assessments that allow students to build confidence incrementally. Yorke and Longden (2008) found that such clarity and structure significantly reduced anxiety and increased persistence among online students. A recent study by Chen (2022) on online social work education confirmed that regular, formative feedback that highlights growth and mastery is a key driver of both self-efficacy and course satisfaction.

Fostering autonomy, a pillar linked to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), can be achieved in online graduate education through flexible learning pathways, student choice in assignment topics and formats, and opportunities for self-directed inquiry into areas of personal passion within the field. Finally, the meaning pillar is addressed by directly and consistently connecting academic content to real-world social justice issues, current ethical dilemmas in practice, and the lived experiences of communities served. This enhances students' intrinsic motivation and solidifies their professional identity (Allen & Kern, 2019). This finding aligns with the work of Freire (1970), who argued that education must be grounded in relevance and critical consciousness to be genuinely transformative. A 2023 study by Davis and Harrison on project-based learning in online MSW programs found that students engaged in community-based virtual projects reported a significantly stronger sense of purpose and connection to the social work profession compared to those in traditional theory-only courses.

Discussion

The integration of Adler's and Allen's theories provides a comprehensive and powerful lens for understanding, analyzing, and mitigating the challenges of online social work education. The fundamental underpinning of Adler's work is the fact that humans are inherently social beings with a desire to connect with, belong to, and contribute to a larger community than themselves. This drive is the bedrock upon which online communities must be consciously built. Using Allen's model, practical, evidence-based approaches can be provided: a multifaceted, systems-based framework that identifies the specific conditions needed to create an educational environment where the fundamental need for belonging is satisfied and sustained. These conditions include strong relationships, feelings of competence, autonomy, and meaning-filled experiences.

Emerging empirical evidence strongly supports the efficacy of this integrated approach. For example, Tasso et al. (2021) found that students enrolled in online programs who experienced higher levels of perceived social support and community connection demonstrated significantly greater academic persistence and psychological well-being, even during periods of intense stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, interventions explicitly aligned with these theoretical constructs—such as structured peer mentoring, collaborative learning communities, and curriculum designed to promote social connectedness—have been empirically validated as effective in reducing attrition rates and improving satisfaction in distance education

settings (O’Keeffe, 2013; Thompson & Bishop, 2022). This growing body of research suggests that Adlerian-informed, belonging-focused pedagogical strategies can cultivate not only academic achievement but also the development of the socially attuned, compassionate, resilient, and ethically committed social work professionals that the world urgently needs.

The challenges of digital education require a move beyond merely translating in-person methods online. Instead, they demand a re-imagining of pedagogy through a lens of belonging. This involves recognizing that every course design decision, from the timing of assignments to the format of discussions, either fosters or hinders community feeling, competence, autonomy, and meaning. The instructor’s role shifts from a primary knowledge-deliverer to a community architect and a facilitator of connected learning.

Implications for Practice: Strategies for Fostering Belonging

To translate this integrated theory into practice, social work educators and program administrators can employ a range of intentional, evidence-informed strategies across multiple levels:

- **Cultivate Instructor-Student Relationships:** This is the cornerstone of online belonging. Drawing on Adler’s emphasis on encouragement, instructors should provide personalized, strengths-based feedback that acknowledges effort and growth (Conklin et al., 2020). Utilizing synchronous video sessions is crucial; options include mandatory virtual office hours, optional real-time discussions on complex topics via platforms like Zoom, and personalized video feedback on assignments. These practices help foster humanized connection and trust between instructors and students, mitigating the anonymity of the online space (Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Reamer, 2023).
- **Facilitate Structured Peer Connections:** Intentional design is needed to create the informal interactions lost online. Implement structured group work with clear, interdependent roles and reflective debriefing components, using cooperative learning strategies grounded in Adlerian theory to promote shared responsibility and deeper engagement (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Adopting virtual cohort models where students progress through the program together enables them to build stronger, sustained peer bonds, leading to greater satisfaction and support (Council on Social Work Education, 2023; Kumar et al., 2024). Creating low-stakes, informal online spaces (e.g., “virtual coffee shops” on discussion boards or dedicated social channels) can also facilitate organic peer-to-peer connection.

- **Integrate Experiential and Reflective Learning:** Bridge the theory-practice gap and build competence and meaning. Utilize high-quality virtual simulations and role-playing scenarios with avatars to provide safe spaces for practicing clinical skills, conducting assessments, and navigating ethical dilemmas, thereby enhancing applied skills and confidence before entering fieldwork contexts (Regehr et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2023). Incorporate reflective journals, e-portfolios, and guided discussion prompts that encourage critical thinking, peer empathy, and deeper self-reflection, connecting academic content to personal values and professional identity (Schön, 1983; Zeman & Swanke, 2023).
- **Provide Proactive Institutional Support Systems:** Belonging must be supported at the programmatic level. Develop comprehensive onboarding workshops and orientation modules that explicitly address online learning skills, community expectations, and available resources, setting the stage for inclusion from day one (Allen et al., 2021). Create and support affinity groups and student-led committees based on shared identities or interests (e.g., BIPOC students, student parents, LGBTQ+ groups) to foster supportive sub-communities. Furthermore, establish structured alum mentorship programs that connect current students with practicing social workers, strengthening students' professional identity formation and providing valuable social capital and networking opportunities through meaningful mentoring relationships (National Association of Social Workers, 2022; Thompson & Bishop, 2022).

Conclusion

Empirical research increasingly highlights the non-negotiable role of fostering a robust sense of belonging in online graduate social work education. In virtual learning environments, where students are at a heightened risk of isolation and disconnection, intentional community building is essential for promoting academic persistence, professional growth, and emotional well-being. Adler's concept of social interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*) articulates the profound intrinsic human motivation to belong, to contribute meaningfully to society, and to sustain nurturing interpersonal connections. Applied to education, this theory emphasizes the crucial importance of designing learning experiences that extend beyond a narrow focus on individual achievement to actively foster shared purpose, mutual responsibility, and a sense of community.

As part of the broad humanistic perspective, Allen's multidimensional framework of belonging identifies four pillars essential to the holistic development and academic success of students: relationships, competence, autonomy, and meaning. Together, these theoretical models provide a comprehensive and robust foundation for structuring online learning environments that address the whole student, meeting both profound psychological needs and academic goals. A systematic implementation of pedagogical strategies aligned with these frameworks - such as structured mentorship, peer-to-peer learning, interactive discussion forums, and experiential assignments that directly relate theoretical knowledge to real-world social work practice - will enable educators to effectively minimize isolation among students, enhance intrinsic motivation, and enhance educational outcomes. These approaches do more than foster academic collaboration; they actively strengthen students' professional identity and sense of agency within their discipline, thereby promoting deeper engagement, resilience, and long-term success in online social work education and the demanding professional practice that follows.

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