

Developing a General Education Course to Address Undergraduates' Mental Health Issues: Academic, Professional and Practical Considerations

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Abstract:

This paper is a reflection of the background, impetus and various considerations involved when the author developed and offered a general education course, to address some of the mental health issues among undergraduates. Students enrolled were mainly first year undergraduates from diverse major disciplines. The paper discusses the challenges encountered and how they were tackled in designing and delivering this new course. Despite practical constraints, the course satisfactorily achieved its intended learning outcomes. Enrolment quota nearly doubled in its second presentation but was quickly filled. This experience suggests that tailor-made general education courses may be a useful means to meet some of the mental health needs of undergraduates.

Key Words:

General education, undergraduates, course development, mental health.

Introduction

The literature has reported widely on the prevalence of many mental health concerns among university students (Hussain, Guppy, Robertson & Temple, 2013; Robotham & Julian, 2006; Mey & Yin, 2015). Severe perceived stress, anxiety, depression, headaches and insomnia are some examples of such problems. A recent study by the National Union of Students found that 78% of students in further and higher education experienced mental health issues in the past year. A third reported having suicidal thoughts (Gill, 2015). The services available and the number of students suffering from such problems are not equal. Unresolved mental health issues can have a negative impact on students' engagement in university, health outcomes, academic performance, retention and graduation. However, many needy students do not seek help owing to stigma and other reasons (Gill, 2015). To deal with the situation, it is not enough to encourage help-seeking behaviors or to refer students to counselling services. A proactive non-stigmatizing approach is necessary to meet students' mental health needs.

A window of opportunity opened when our University introduced a new curriculum structure in the Autumn 2012 term. One of the major changes was that all students were required to take two 5-credit general education courses offered outside their major disciplines. This change was in response to a government-led academic reform in the secondary school (high school) education system in Hong Kong. The new academic structure changed from three years junior secondary, two years senior secondary, two years matriculation, three years university to 334, that is to say, three years junior secondary, three years senior secondary, and four years university. All students admitted to universities will now receive one extra year of university education starting September 2012. With the new introduction of required general education courses at our University, I designed a course entitled "Stress and Well-Being" in an attempt to address students' need to deal with stress and mental health issues.

Course design: Academic and professional considerations

In designing this new course, my knowledge of educational psychology and clinical psychology served as the backbone. I wanted this course to have the following characteristics:

- Comprises theoretically sound and evidence-based materials;
- Adopts a holistic health framework;
- Includes both academic and applied topics;
- Suits students from different disciplines;
- Covers both negative (such as the negative impacts of trauma) and positive aspects (such as using positive strategies of humour and gratitude for enhancing well-being) of topics related to stress and well-being; and
- Explores stress management and well-being enhancement strategies beyond the individual level by examining how social, organizational and societal supportive measures can reduce the debilitating effects of stress.

With the above characteristics and the principles of outcomes-based education (Biggs, 1999) in mind, I developed five intended learning outcomes (ILOs) for students taking this course. Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

- Explain major theoretical models of stress and their relationship to well-being;
- Analyze common responses to stressors;
- Analyze the impact of stressful events;
- Discuss strategies to manage stress and enhance well-being; and
- Suggest stress management strategies at the personal, organizational and societal levels.

Topics included are as follows:

- Theoretical models of stress and well-being;
- Psycho-physiological basis of stress;
- Understanding health and wellness;
- Common stressors among university students;
- Stress at work;
- Disasters and human mishaps;
- Stress and well-being in the local context;
- Stress assessment and management strategies;
- Contributions of positive psychology and other strategies to enhance well-being;
- Stress management at the interpersonal, organizational and societal levels.

Course assessment included continuous coursework (60%) and an end-of-course examination (40%). Coursework consisted of three components: a short essay which required students to analyze sources of stress in different target groups and suggest strategies for these groups to manage their stressors and enhance well-being (30%); a brief self-reflection on students' own learning journeys after reviewing the exercises, activities and worksheets completed in this course (10%); and a mid-term test (20%). These components assessed ILOs 2 – 5, 1 and 2, and 1, 3 and 4 respectively. The end-of-course examination assessed all topics covered in the course.

Before this course was formally offered, the course proposal underwent a quality assurance process, including review by an external course assessor, review and approval by the School Board, Internal Validation Committee, and the University Senate.

Practical issues in course delivery

As our School Dean anticipated that the course would attract many students, she set the quota for this course at 200 (later increased to 205, the maximum seating capacity, upon students' special requests). From my perspective, a large class could allow the course to serve more students who might want to learn strategies to deal with stress. However, I could envisage many practical problems associated with a large class, student engagement and support is one example. There were no research projects or postgraduate students working in the area of stress and well-being in my School. In addition, there were classroom allocation difficulties and time-tabling constraints and it was not feasible to split the class into smaller tutorials. I advertised for

part-time teaching assistants (TAs) but ended up finding only two suitable candidates to help with the marking. One of them had very minimal teaching experience and the other had none. So, even with the marking of worksheets and assignments, I had to give the TAs several briefings and trial-mark meetings.

In planning course delivery, I was well aware of the Presage-Process-Product (3P) model (Biggs, 1989, 1999, 2001) of teaching and learning. In this model, the presage factors are what exist before the educational event takes place, that is, student factors and the teaching context. These include factors such as students' prior knowledge, ability and learning approaches, the nature of the content, institutional climate and procedures, etc.

Considering the Presage factors, teaching a large class was difficult enough, but it became more so after an examination of students' background. The information showed that the cohort came from very diverse disciplines - computing, nursing, Chinese language, accounting, science and technology, business administration, creative writing and film arts, etc. Moreover, students enrolled in this course were mostly in their first term of university studies. The literature shows that first year students have many anxieties and concerns about managing their new role (Gibney, Moore, Murphy & O'Sullivan, 2011). I took this finding and the above-mentioned student characteristics into consideration carefully. Therefore, I started with an introduction of the practical aspects to help students adapt to university teaching and meet the requirements of this course. Then, I moved to an overview of the subject matter, giving them a whole picture of what to expect and a road map of the learning journey ahead.

The Process factors lie in the heart of teaching and learning. In the 3P model, the process affects whether learning-related activities can produce the Product, or the ILOs. Considering process factors, I did several things. The first few lectures were taught at a slower than usual pace using a spiral approach, with jargon, key concepts and theoretical models distributed and revisited in different approaches to facilitate understanding. A spiral approach, spacing materials apart, has been found to be better than the massing approach where materials are crammed in long sessions. It leads to better performance, especially for long term retention (Son & Simon, 2012).

Apart from pacing and spacing, I also used various ways to engage students and enrich the course. I believed "If students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes." (Shuell, 1986, p.429)

To engage students, I shared many practical examples and cases, showed video clips, used demonstrations and involved students in games and in-class exercises (such as practising breathing and relaxation techniques). I also walked around with a wireless microphone to interact with students. There were short self-tests and question and answer moments in every lesson to promote and consolidate learning. Students also had access to the University's Online Learning Environment which enabled them to engage in online forum discussions, access handouts and other resources. They could consult with me during class breaks or at my office.

Course evaluation

The course started with 205 students enrolled and 199 remained at the end of the term, a retention rate of 97% which was encouraging. It was rewarding to note that all students passed this course and 25% obtained either an A- or an A grade.

Student feedback was collected through various means, such as face-to-face discussions, e-mails and online communications throughout the course, and a course-end questionnaire dispatched by the University's Planning Unit. Many students expressed that among other things, they liked the activities and exercises in class best. For example, one student commented: "I appreciate that health is related to stress and the lecturer can use lots of examples and activities to explicate the concept in this course."

They also found the stress management strategies taught useful and the learning atmosphere relaxing. One student wrote: "I can apply my knowledge in daily life and it's useful and helpful for me to tackle and relieve stress. It's also interesting to know more about what's happening in our body and what indeed causes us to feel stressful."

Some students, however, found the course difficult. They asked for more handouts. Nonetheless, on the whole, students were satisfied with this course. They opined that it could achieve the expected learning outcomes.

The External Examiner was also happy about this course. He reviewed the course outline, sample student assignments, test papers and examination scripts. He liked the course structure, and considered the assessment method and the overall grading fair and appropriate. He also thought that students demonstrated the desired learning for this course.

Reflections and concluding remarks

Combining all the academic, professional and practical considerations together to create this new general education course was challenging. It eventually paid off when I heard the External Examiner's and students' positive feedback. On subsequent presentations of this course, I made some modifications in course content, assignment requirements, and mode of delivery. This was done to adjust to contextual changes and further match students' needs. For example, one change in the second presentation was that the course quota was raised to 350. The course became the largest general education course at our University. Because of increased course quota and also due to turnover of the TAs, I had to recruit and train more TAs to assist with the course. I also made liaison with the educational technology personnel to add online functions to enhance and support teaching and learning. In addition, to broaden students' perspectives, I invited frontline practitioners to share their experience on special topics, such as on the implementation of positive youth programmes in Hong Kong schools.

New challenges in teaching and managing this course emerge in its subsequent presentations. However, I find it worth the efforts to make accommodations as students seem to benefit personally from this non-stigmatizing, proactive, self-help approach in managing stress. I hope similar general education courses can also be offered in other universities to ease students' mental health concerns and enhance their well-being.

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