【Teaching Practice Report】

Overcoming Barriers to Student Wellbeing in the Classroom: Utilizing Universal Design for Learning Principles in Lesson Planning, Content, and Delivery

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Abstract

Recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have brought the mental wellbeing of university students to the forefront of many educator's minds. However, they are not, nor should they be expected to be, experts in psychological matters. Therefore, the question becomes as follows: what can educators do to support the wellbeing of students? Taking a social psychology model of disability to understand student behaviors, this paper applies Universal Design for Learning principles to common English language class activities, and based on a teaching journal kept by the author, evaluates their perceived impact on student wellbeing. Comments and suggestions for modifications and accommodations are then offered in order to aid teachers who seek to embed student wellbeing into the design and delivery of their English language curricula.

Keywords: Curriculum design, equality, mental health, psychology, wellbeing

Introduction

Awareness of mental health and wellbeing related issues in society has grown in recent times, at least in part due to global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, 2021). In the tertiary education sector, these challenges have become particularly acute: one study found that in 2020–2021, more than 60% of university students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem, a rise of almost 50% since 2013 (Dopp et al., 2013). In addition to the intrinsic wellbeing impacts incurred by the affected individual, there is also the effect that mental health has on learning. For instance, students with such problems are not only less likely to complete individual modules and get passing grades than those without mental health difficulties (Richardson, 2015), they are also more likely drop out of university altogether (Brown, 2016). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these concerns. One report noted that 80% of respondents said their mental health had deteriorated during the Coronavirus pandemic (Young Minds, 2020), with young adults aged 18–24–that is, the age of most university students–at greatest risk of suffering from hopelessness, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts (Mental Health Foundation, 2020).

Therefore, having established that challenges to mental wellbeing experienced by university students are significant in number, have a detrimental effect on learning outcomes, and have been exacerbated by recent global events, the need for educators to reflect on mental wellbeing is arguably greater than ever

Regarding terminology, while "mental health" and "wellbeing" are often used synonymously, wellbeing is a wider concept of which mental health belongs to and refers to "a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life" (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b). Moreover, some advocate for a focus on wellbeing rather than mental health. As Houghton and Anderson (2017, p.7) contend,

"…not everyone who experiences a decline in their wellbeing would associate that with a 'health'

concern. Moreover, we wish to draw a distinction between mental wellbeing, which we all have, and a mental health problem which only some of us would identify as experiencing."

In other words, a focus on wellbeing is more inclusive and therefore has greater application, widening the potential benefits of actions that consider it.

Although this paper will discuss concepts around wellbeing, the aim is not to diagnose or assess students for mental health problems, or even to have knowledge of related terminology beyond a layman's definition. Rather, it is hoped that by exploring common wellbeing concepts in the context of the language classroom, individual educators will be better equipped to support the wellbeing of *all* learners. If serious concerns about student wellbeing do occur, advice should be sought from the relevant support department of the individual instruction.

Background

Barriers to Wellbeing

In order to discover how wellbeing can be addressed through curriculum design and delivery, it is first necessary to explore various ways in which learning can impact wellbeing at the classroom level. One useful concept here refers to *barriers to wellbeing* (Oliver 1996). Rooted in the social model of disability, this approach focuses on the environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers that affect a disabled individual's inclusion and progress in life (Oliver, 1996). Related to this, Lister, Seale, and Douce (2021) discuss a comprehensive array of wellbeing issues in an educational context in their taxonomy of barriers and enablers to wellbeing. This detailed work recognizes the multivariate environmental, skills-related, and study-related aspects of wellbeing in learning. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover the work in this field in-depth, a selection of the principal themes identified by Oliver (1996) in particular will be identified and introduced below, along with associated major wellbeing concerns.

Identity. The link between identity and wellbeing is long accepted in psychology. There are innumerable ways through which the classroom experience may impact identity; however, as a starting point, based on Tajfel's (1981) influential work, conceptions of identity in the classroom might consider the learner's personal identity (allowing them opportunities to know and express themselves and their preferences); group identity (letting them participate in group activities in ways they like and are comfortable with); and demographic identity (through awareness and representation). As this can lead to more positive self-conceptions and higher self-esteem, a focus on identity from the formulation stage of lesson planning can therefore help teachers not only to avoid putting up barriers to their students' wellbeing but also design activities that promote it (Bliuc et al., 2017).

Belonging. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, learning is a social process and interactions are key. These social interactions (and therefore learning) inevitably involve the formation of groups–from university wide cohorts, to particular classes, and also formal or informal study groups within classes–at which point a sense of belonging becomes an important consideration. Skipper and Fay (2019) argued that if we feel accepted and valued by other members of a group, we are more likely to seek and develop stronger relationships with them, which will in turn lead to improved wellbeing. The reverse is also true. If we feel like we do not belong, our mental energy is taken up by these feelings, leaving less space for learning (Eisenberger & Cole, 2012). Indeed, many studies have

linked sense of belonging with student performance (OECD, 2000). The responsibility then again falls on educators to focus on belonging in the classroom through cultivating a sense of community wherever possible, explicitly encouraging a supportive atmosphere, and representing students' identities in lesson activities and materials if possible.

Powerlessness. This refers to "state in which individuals either lack or believe that they lack control or influence over factors or events that affect their health (mental or physical), personal lives, or the society in which they live" (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a). The connection to wellbeing is clear, in that when people feel like things are outside their control, their wellbeing is challenged and they are more at risk of mental heal problems (Cheng et al., 2013). Among university students, those who believe they have control over their lives are more likely to be proactive in their learning, whereas those who do not believe they have control are more likely to experience passivity and feelings of hopelessness (Khumalo & Plattner, 2019). An initial way to address this is therefore to find ways to give a sense of power back to students. Studies have shown that whether this is real or simply perceived control is not important, and the wellbeing outcomes are the same (Khumalo & Plattner, 2019). Giving choice over topics, questions, or other classroom details amount to what Scrivener (2012) calls "small bursts of democracy" (p. 115) that can make students feel empowered and heard. Meanwhile, it has long been argued that explicitly emphasizing that academic failures and successes are connected to individually controllable things such as effort, rather than uncontrollable things such as intelligence or natural ability, can also promote a sense of control (Dweck, 1975).

Stress and anxiety. Stress and anxiety are intrinsically connected, with stress described as the response to a threatening situation and anxiety as the reaction to that stress (Mental Health Foundation, 2018). While stress can sometimes be positive (when it is "pressure" to motivate achievement), it can also have negative impacts if there is too much of it. Indeed, the statistics related to university students and stress and anxiety are alarming. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one meta-analysis suggested that the occurrence of anxiety reached 29%, and that stress prevalence reached 23% (Wang et al., 2021). When looking at cases without diagnosis or treatment, the figures become even starker: 84% of students said they felt overwhelmed, 79% felt exhausted, and 46% felt hopeless (Samuolis et al., 2015). The relevance for learning outcomes is clear in that anxiety and stress are clearly related to lower academic performance (Kitzrow, 2003). There are, of course, a range of personal, cultural, and circumstantial influences on stress and anxiety that fall outside the classroom and therefore outside a teacher's influence. However, by being aware of and encouraging coping strategies in their learners, teachers can still have a positive effect. One tactic is problem-focused coping, where students ask for and receive help on a difficult, stress-inducing task (Clarke, 2006). Another is emotion-focused coping, where the stressful task (and therefore the stressful feeling) is avoided altogether (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Moreover, in further evidence of the importance of belonging, how connected a student feels to their school has also been shown to play a role in ameliorating stress and its effects (Gilman & Anderman, 2006).

Social anxiety. A particular kind of anxiety worthy of its own mention is social anxiety. This discomfort or fear of social situations or events can for some be a barrier to everyday wellbeing as it manifests itself in discomfort or even complete avoidance of certain tasks. As the classroom environment is, in principal, unavoidably social, this type of anxiety is especially relevant for academic performance. It has been found to impair academic educational achievement in particular due to

reduced concentration levels in the classroom (Leigh et al., 2021) as well as how it effects communication with instructors, peers, and overall student experiences (Archbell & Coplan, 2022). However, it is important not to assume that the "solution" to social anxiety is simply more communication and group participation for the concerned individual. Research also shows that that some students simply prefer to work alone where possible and may achieve more as a result (Hood et al., 2021).

Universal Design for Learning

It will be evident to anyone who has spent even a short amount of time in a classroom that every learner is different. Still, while acknowledging that there is no "one-size-fits-all" strategy for addressing classroom wellbeing, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018) can yet provide a useful guiding framework for those seeking to cultivate a teaching space with student welfare at its heart. At its core, it encourages flexibility in teaching and learning and can aid a teacher in making their classrooms more comfortable for all. All learners can benefit from UDL principles, not only those with identified wellbeing issues. UDL achieves this by focusing on three key areas: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression. Due to limitations in the scope of this paper, only a brief overview of UDL's main tenets will be offered before discussing how they can be put into practice in the classroom.

Multiple means of engagement. Offering multiple means of engagement may take the form of giving students a diverse and authentic lesson experience with chances to work alone or in groups. This should be implemented with the individual's autonomy in mind, not forced on them.

Multiple means of representation. This can involve providing learning materials and content in different modes (i.e., audio, video, written, etc.) so that learner autonomy and comfort can be respected, allowing them to choose the format they prefer wherever possible.

Multiple means of action and expression. Related to the above, multiple means of action and expression are simply connected to giving students the opportunity to choose how they prefer to demonstrate their learning. This may include allowing them to record a video instead of presenting in front of the class or answering a topic through a writing assignment rather than a speaking assignment. This must be balanced with individual class or institutional-level grading and assessment criteria.

Methodology

To explore specific ways in which UDL can be employed to overcome various classroom wellbeing barriers, this paper will continue by describing various activities included in typical English language lessons. Then, based on the author's real reflections on teaching these activities, they will be reviewed in light of their potential wellbeing impacts, and suggestions will be made for changes. Finally, more general thoughts on possible intersections of English language classes and wellbeing will be examined, and further amendments will be offered. These views were recorded in a reflective teaching journal, which is a useful means for educators to scrutinize their classroom behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes (McDonough, 1994). Principally, the three cognitive dimensions of reflective

teaching were analyzed: reflection for action, reflection in action, and reflection on action-in other words, interrogating one's instruction before, during, and after the event (Schon, 1983). It is then hoped that the reader will gain a practical understanding of how to embed mental wellbeing in their own curricula.

Discussion

Quizzes

A short paper-based quiz may be given to students in order to assess completion of homework reading tasks. A standard number of minutes is given for this activity, and the filled-out answer sheets are exchanged with a classmate for immediate peer grading. However, when carried out in this standard way, this activity does not follow UDL guidelines. Firstly, the lack of flexibility and autonomy afforded may make learners feel powerless, and secondly, grading each other's work can also have wellbeing impacts. While peer grading is an established time-saver for teachers (Sadler & Good, 2010), studies have suggested that having other learners know and judge their performance can be a source of anxiety (Weisi & Karimi, 2013).

To make this stage of the lesson more wellbeing-friendly, alternative methods of homework assessment should be considered. One possibility is to ask students to journal their reflections on the reading assignment instead of taking a quiz, which could allow freer expression, potentially helping them feel empowered because, as Baik et al. (2017) argue, it allows them to align their responses with their own personal interests. A second benefit is that by giving learners the chance to keep possession of their journals themselves, they provide a differentiated form of self-assessment through which progress over time can be reflected on and self-monitored, which are important parts of the UDL (CAST, 2018). A final benefit here is that it removes the need for peer grading and any associated anxiety. If teachers do wish to continue using quizzes to monitor homework completion, consideration should at least be given to marking the answer sheets themselves.

Speaking Fluency

Speaking-focused classes such as English Discussion Class regularly have students completing a speaking fluency activity that involves standing up for a total of 15 minutes, taking turns speaking on unrehearsed topics. First and foremost, asking students to stand for 15 minutes here may be physically difficult for those with impairments. Officially, there are both formal and informal institutional channels through which students may make their teachers aware of any problems they may have with standing up for extended periods, such as disclosing a physical disability to the student support office. However, in practice, many individuals are reluctant to do so for reasons including fear of stigma and a lack of awareness of available support and accommodations (Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2017). In its present form, this activity therefore puts up what Lister, Seale and Douce (2021) refer to as a *physical space barrier to learning*–as this physical activity is unrelated to the learning outcomes, it can easily be removed from the lesson. A simple adjustment would be to arrange the desks in the classroom to permit students to carry out this speaking activity while sitting, making the lesson less physically demanding.

Furthermore, typically, the speaking prompts at this point of the lesson are defined by the teacher, with students offered no autonomy. Denying students the chance to utilize their decision-

making ability may further contribute to a sense of powerlessness. An alternative would be to offer a range of questions related to the topic for the students to choose from while making sure the choices are simple enough to follow, and enable learners to express their true selves.

Asking Students to Volunteer Answers to the Class

At various points in a lesson, the teacher may select individuals to briefly present their ideas about the topic to the whole class. The goal of this activity may be to check comprehension or share interesting comments with other students. Indeed, on the surface, this may seem like a harmless routine event in any classroom; however, it does raise wellbeing concerns. It has been suggested that, especially for English language learners, the pressure of having to speak un-prepared in front of the class can actually cause significant feelings of stress and anxiety (Mak, 2011).

Refraining from routinely asking students to speak unrehearsed can easily eliminate this source of anxiety, and to alternatively assess their understanding of the material, the teacher could monitor the students' speaking and write down any noteworthy ideas. The teacher themselves can share these ideas with the class. Although monitoring accurately can be challenging, particularly with large class sizes, if done with care, the teacher will still be able to understand the strengths, weaknesses, and areas of comfort of a class. They will therefore be able to take into account the diverse learning profiles within a particular group while also meeting the learning outcomes of the lesson plan (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Group Work (Debates, Discussions, Presentations, etc.)

Group work in particular is a known source of stress for students. For example, the process of group formation has the capacity to significantly affect feelings of inclusion during an activity, as well as impact anxiety levels and overall classroom comfort (McPherson et al., 2019). Moreover, these activities may be further problematic for learner wellbeing, as they often do not easily allow for reasonable alternatives or adjustments and due to the potential for ambiguity and lack of clear structure (University of Kent, 2016).

A direct way to remove some ambiguity from group formation is for the teacher to assign groups. Although this method may take away some autonomy, the wellbeing benefits may be a worthwhile tradeoff. Similarly, the teacher could allot clear roles within the group to further reduce uncertainty–for example, deciding in advance which members will ask questions, who will control the slides, and who will present each point in a debate, etc. Moreover, close attention should be paid to both individual group members' behaviours and also to wider group dynamics. In order to minimize negative social and learning experiences, the teacher could disrupt alpha-pairs, promote equal participation, and encourage quieter members to contribute in non-pressuring ways (Gilbert, 2016).

In addition, after the groups have been formed but before the group work begins, an icebreaker should be carried out. A suggested activity here is to ask students to share 3 important facts about themselves. However, students should be made aware that they can share as much or as little as is comfortable and may skip this activity if they wish. In allowing the students to speak about their identity in this way, wellbeing is promoted through the building of cooperative relationships (Barret, 2014).

Exams

A final frequent activity in English classes is the exam–either assigned in-class or as a take-home task. No matter the form, the link between exams and wellbeing problems is long-established, with one study noting that they were the number one source of stress for UK school children (Kyriacou & Butcher, 1993). Similarly, anxiety and negative feelings toward exams have been found to affect both a learner's ability to perform and also self-estimations of ability (Zwettler et al., 2018). An activity that replaces the exam with a written assessment could reduce stress on the student as it allows for a more flexible completion of the task (CAST, 2018).

Further Considerations

The Need for Reasonable Accommodations

A key point to bear in mind throughout lesson planning and delivery is the need for accommodations to be made for students with different abilities, preferences, and comfort levels. At all times, teachers should approach their duties with flexibility so that wherever possible, all students can participate effectively while still meeting the learning outcomes. A concrete example is that students may, after communication with the teacher or student support staff, submit alternative forms of assessment. This may take the form of submitting a speaking task in written form or being able to complete a task as part of a pair. Such inclusive lesson design can minimize the negative effects of the classroom experience and enhance a learner's wellbeing (Gaydarov, 2014).

Clear Goals and Processes

As mentioned above, ambiguity can be a major source anxiety in the classroom, especially among foreign language learners (Dewaele & Shan, 2013). Simply put, being unsure of what to do or what is expected of them can make students uncomfortable. An important step toward mitigating these negative feelings is to make sure lesson plans–including instructions, tasks, and learning goals-conform to SMART criteria. This requires that tasks be simple, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. Using this framework to reduce ambiguity can make students feel more confident in the classroom and therefore reduce the risk of negative wellbeing effects (Fulmer, 2017).

Practically speaking, the purpose of each individual task should be made clear at each stage of the lesson. This can be done verbally during the class and also in written form in a syllabus distributed before a course begins. Along similar lines, making the learning outcomes known in advance (through the institution's online portal) and reinforcing them by repeating them at the start of class can improve the learners' metacognition and empower them to make strategic decisions, which put them in control of their own learning.

Barriers to Implementation

In terms of challenges that an educator may face when preparing and teaching a wellbeing focused curriculum, the additional time commitment needed is one concern. For instance, to consistently and effectively adhere to UDL criteria would necessitate "a thoughtful, slow, and rigorous process […requiring] enough time for ideation, iteration, high-quality media production,

and formative assessments" (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021, p. 17). There may also be institutional-level barriers. Teachers must consider whether or not they have the freedom to design or adapt lessons as they wish; the assessments may be fixed by entities outside their control, and some of the required resources may be unavailable. As Scott (2018) summarized, new approaches are "often contingent on teachers' liberties to use inclusive instructional strategies" (p. 1).

Lastly, students themselves may be reluctant to embrace different styles of learning or assessment. The source of this resistance can be rooted in a culture's learning and social norms. In Japan, for example, education is typically expected (by providers *and* students) to be "top-down" or teacher-led (Nemoto, 1999). Teachers employing more student-centered, UDL-focused lesson plans may be met with skepticism, as this style may vastly differ from what students are used to.

Conclusion

Educators seeking to tackle the challenges of implementing a curriculum that is mindful of student welfare would do well to heed the words of Freire (2000), who advocated for respectful dialogue between students and teachers. His principles for positive communication included equality in interactions; humility in respecting a student's knowledge and dignity; faith in both your own and others' abilities; critical thinking in approaching knowledge; and hope by way of an optimistic attitude toward student abilities and outcomes. If these messages are followed, the learner is more likely to have a positive classroom experience. Indeed, overcoming such challenges is a key part of the teacher's role in terms of promoting institutional change through research and practice and helping students to feel the emotional and educational benefits that can be attained through curriculum design.

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