

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A RESOURCE FOR REDUCING STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL BURNOUT

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ABSTRACT

The emotional well-being of students has been identified as an important learning dimension even before the COVID-19 pandemic, as it increases students' academic and non-academic achievement, as well as promotes the growth of students' personalities. In higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of emotional well-being has identified significant risks from two points of view: the first is the abrupt termination of on-the-job training, and the second is the remote learning process. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has become an extraordinary and challenging pedagogical situation for both educators and students. This situation is characterized by both isolation and uncertainty in the implementation of the learning process, as well as exponentially increased students' independent workload and uncertainty in the requirements, which are pretexts for students' emotional burnout and dysfunctional emotional well-being in digital learning settings. The aim of this study is to identify the benefits of digital storytelling as a method of pedagogical support to reduce students' emotional burnout and promote emotional well-being. This article presents the results of a case study in one Latvian higher education institution. For four months, each week, 12 participants shared stories on topics relevant to them. Transcripts of each session were encoded and analysed using the high-quality data processing program NVivo 12. Analysing the obtained data, categories were identified that describe the process and benefits of digital storytelling as a method of pedagogical support. It is concluded that digital storytelling promotes the exchange of information, collaborative learning, understanding the meaning of one's problems, self-efficacy, reflexivity, expands the repertoire of emotional burnout management methods, therefore it is considered a resource in reducing emotional burnout.

Keywords: COVID-19, digital storytelling, emotional burnout, higher education, NVivo, pedagogical support, well-being

Introduction

The global pandemic caused by the 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19) has dramatically changed people's daily and professional lives. Solving the various problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional burnout

has become a chronic psychological and physiological condition among the working population of all professions. Numerous studies have been and are being conducted to investigate its prevalence, factors, and possible solutions, as the COVID-19 pandemic both created new stress triggers and brightly illuminated those people who chose to psychologically ignore before the pandemic. Thus, a new sum of individual triggers was formed. As the world approaches the third year of the pandemic and the unpredictable post-pandemic situation, a massive set of stressors has become a permanent and uncertain emotional background to everyday life. With its presence, this emotional background increases the risk of burnout for everyone. This is one of the reasons why, in modern theoretical concepts, well-being becomes the subject of research in many fields (Zisberga, 2022). Some professions are more susceptible to burnout and its consequences than others. These are professions whose professional life is related to working with people, so educators and medical practitioners are in a zone of high risk of emotional burnout. The discussion of the configuration of polar opinions about medical staff during the pandemic was actively and relentlessly maintained in media and people's narratives, but the discussion about the emotional state of teachers only sporadically outlined in the public discourse. As another particularly sensitive category to emotional burnout in the context of a pandemic, are the students of higher education institutions. A combination of different factors is mentioned as causes of emotional burnout for students: a decrease in the number of classes, a disproportionate increase in workload, a decrease in academic performance, as well as thoughts about early school leaving (Aucejo et al., 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic, the study process was characterized by both isolation and uncertainty in the implementation of the study process, as well as exponentially increased students' independent workload and uncertainty in the requirements that formed the background for students' emotional burnout and dysfunctional emotional well-being in general. Therefore, the idea and topicality of this study was determined by the situation when students in the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to uncertainty and increased workload, needed emotional support, i. e. students asked to provide an emotional support group. Thus, opportunities were sought to solve the topical problem of students. This situation brought up significant early school leaving signals, as emotional burnout contributes to the decision to drop out. Early school leaving, on the other hand, marks significant risks in both the individual development and the social sphere (Gintere, 2022). Thus, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic had become an unusual and challenging pedagogical situation for both educators and students. In order to solve the situation in pedagogical practice, the idea of the research was formulated and

according to it the aim of the research was determined: to identify the benefits of digital storytelling as a method of pedagogical support to reduce students' emotional burnout.

Dimensions of using storytelling in higher education

Summarizing and analysing theoretical insights of Sheafer (2017), Smeda et. al. (2012), Goodman and Newman (2014) it can be concluded that storytelling has three of the most commonly used dimensions in the education sector.

First dimension. Digital storytelling as a method of teaching and learning. Digital storytelling can be used as a learning method in several ways – personal storytelling, storytelling of past events, or telling a specific learning topic. Digital storytelling is an important tool to engage and motivate students to create their own stories. Their formation engages students in a meaningful learning process, promotes motivation and reflection on the deep learning process, integrates new knowledge as a continuation of previous one. In-depth learning takes place because in stories knowledge and experience is tested with logic and reasoning.

The second dimension. Digital storytelling as a technique for personality growth. Digital storytelling links the learning process and emotions of higher education, thus promoting self-directed learning and personal initiative in both engagement and learning. It is through stories that experience acquires meaning and through reflection and interpretation that knowledge is constructed. Interaction in the process of storytelling allows mutual learning and encourages human development. In this case, learning takes place when the reflection on the experience has been transformed into a logical, meaningful story shared with others.

The third dimension is digital storytelling as a pedagogical support technique. Personal stories that reveal personal or emotionally significant details can contribute to a level of support and mutual respect. Nowadays, it is emphasized that it is not so important – to tell a story about a topic from a safe distance (for example, a book, a film, a podcast), much more important is the opportunity to explore an authentic, true life experience. So, digital storytelling is made up of human experience stories. Their goal is cognitive reconstruction of events, cognitive problem solving in order to change dysfunctional behaviour. As part of this study, the same dysfunctional behaviours associated with emotional burnout were observed. Storytelling improves one's emotional burnout coping skills and promotes a range of coping strategies, as well as promotes a healthy personal view of life's challenges. Digital storytelling also reduces the effects of stress, anger and anxiety, ventilates disturbing emotions, promotes emotional health, stabilizes traumatic experiences, creates healing experiences, promotes self-expression

and mutual learning. The story gives people the opportunity to reflect on their experience, to understand and accept how the experience has shaped their own world and how the person perceives it. In turn, Holloway and Freshwater (2007) emphasize that storytelling allows people to recognize their vulnerability, share their emotions and experiences, and have a voice that can be heard. Storytelling promotes a sense that a person can lead complex emotions, and can also be used as a coping strategy (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007), while storytelling links the present with the past and the future (Liehr & Smith, 2014). In addition, storytelling is a technique for conducting targeted dialogue between generations, thus providing a channel for emotionally close communication and self-awareness (Liehr & Smith, 2014). This theoretical knowledge clearly positions the teacher in the educational process as a person of emotional support. In turn, the role of the teacher and pedagogical mastery in higher education is outlined as an essential part of the pedagogical process (Medne & Jansone Ratinika, 2019), as well as marks the teacher as a determining human resource in the implementation of civic education (Medne, et al., 2021).

Methodology

Type of study

For the empirical study, an action study was selected, implemented in the interpretative paradigm. This choice is supported by the arguments that the objectives of such research themes include both addressing different challenges and improving the professionalism of practitioners, as well as setting an educational target for such a design, which is the most important focus in this study. The use of this design allows the study participants to better understand themselves in relation to the discussed topic and the spoken meanings (Koshy et al., 2010). Qualitative research design is suitable for research in the educational sciences (Lodico et al., 2010), because it allows to obtain information about the pedagogical process and its phenomena from both the students' and teachers' perspectives (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), learning their experiences, attitudes, interpretations, concepts, feelings and opinions (Lodico et al., 2010). The idea of qualitative research is to discover the world's vision and experience in an inductive way. The researcher and the participants of the research collaborate so that as a result the researcher can reconstruct the understanding or conceptualization of the world of the participants of the research.

Study procedure

The research was implemented in one higher education institution in Latvia. The intervention procedure was as follows: for four months, every

week, 12 participants shared stories on topics that were relevant to them. Sessions were performed remotely via the Zoom platform. The stories of each session were transcribed and the transcripts were encoded. A total of 216 transcripts were obtained and analysed using the qualitative data processing program NVivo 12.

The obtained data were analysed in two stages:

Stage 1. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 program and analysed using qualitative and quantitative context analysis. The choice of the data management program NVivo in the study was determined by the argument that it increases the validity of the qualitative study (Siccama & Penna, 2008). Transcript data processing and analysis was implemented in the following order: (1) preparation of transcripts in Microsoft Word; (2) import of transcripts into NVivo file; (3) open coding in NVivo file (indexing motifs identified), assigning the code to the respective transcript text fragment of the interview; (4) interpretation of the content implemented based on the code structure created in the context analysis. A study by Schaufeli et al. (2020) has been selected to identify the codes. The choice is justified by the design of this study, which conceptualizes emotional burnout, as well as by the meta-analysis of the most famous instruments for measuring emotional burnout and their effectiveness. The authors of the study refer to this set of burnout measurement instruments as the gold standard for burnout research (Schaufeli et al., 2020). In total, six codes were identified: exhaustion, emotional disorders, mental distancing, cognitive disorders, psychological complaints, psychosomatic complaints.

Stage 2. To check the reliability of the change in emotional burnout signs, it was tested on sample sets related to the Student's t-test.

Research ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical aspects of the research; informed consent was obtained from the participants of the study. Participation in the digital storytelling group was voluntary. Study participants were informed that they were entitled to stop participating in the group at any time. Informed consent was once again reviewed after two months, as the study's specific context and unpredictable outcomes in sensitive populations may alter the respondent's opinion. At the end of the study, the Member checking method was implemented (Koelsch, 2013). Confidentiality was respected in the study: transcripts were coded during the transcription process and deleted after coding.

Respondents

The respondent group consisted of members of the storytelling group. The group was set up at the request of the participants and participation in

it was voluntary. Participation in the group was started by 12 students and concluded by 12 students.

Results

In order to analyse the content of emotional burnout components and their frequency of their use in transcripts, all six codes were identified in the NVivo program during open coding: exhaustion, emotional disorders, mental distancing, cognitive disorders, psychological complaints, psychosomatic complaints. In total, the following range of codes was obtained (Table 1): the largest number of codes consists of psychological complaints ($n = 451$), the smallest – mental distancing (195). The frequency with which the codes are used indicates how widely and extensively each code is decoded in the interviews, also implicitly indicating what is relevant or important to the respondent.

Table 1. Total number of codes in all transcripts

Code	Total number of codes
Psychological complaints	451
Cognitive disorders	345
Exhaustion	322
Emotional disorders	291
Psychosomatic complaints	245
Mental distancing	195

The respondents' situational vision and self-esteem are demonstrated in the content of the codes:

Exhaustion – *I feel mentally tired in my studies and work; everything I do requires a lot of effort; after a day's work I find it hard to recover my energy, I feel physically tired in my studies and work; when I get up in the morning, I lack energy to start a new day; I wake up tired; it's hard to manage my work; I get tired quickly; at the end of the day I feel mentally exhausted and emptied; I have no strength to open my mouth and speak up and that's even when I haven't really done anything.*

Mental distancing – *I find it hard to find enthusiasm; I don't think much about what I'm doing and I... I'm on autopilot; I feel a lot of reluctance towards what we have to do; I feel indifferent to my work; I'm cynical about what my work means to others.*

Cognitive impairment – *I can't concentrate; I find it hard to think clearly; I'm forgetful and distracted; I make mistakes in what I do because my thoughts are busy with other things.*

Emotional disorders – *I can't control my emotions, I yell at my parents all the time; I don't know myself in the way I emotionally react; everything annoys me if things don't work out as I intended; I suddenly grieve without knowing why; I can inadvertently exaggerate.*

Psychological complaints – *I have trouble falling asleep; I wake up at night and cannot fall asleep; I am very worried about everything; I feel tense; I feel like something will happen all the time; I have had panic attacks that hadn't happened before; I am disturbed by noise.*

Psychosomatic complaints – *I have palpitations; I have chest pain; I have stomach pain; I have constipation; I have diarrhea and not only before exams; I don't want to eat at all; I eat all the time, as if I lived in a fridge; I often have headaches; I often get ill.*

When comparing the number of codes in the first and final storytelling session, it can be concluded that the number of all emotional burnout codes during digital storytelling intervention has decreased. Cognitive disorders have decreased the most, and psychosomatic complaints have decreased the least. This leads to the conclusion that digital storytelling is a sufficiently effective method of correction in the case of cognitive disorders. Codes that included psychosomatic scores and mental distancing scores have decreased the least. If psychosomatic disorders are expressed in a high degree, it is likely that some other more effective method can be found to reduce them. In this case, the storytelling technique may be combined with cognitive-behavioural therapy. However, this assumption should be verified in further studies. The code dynamics are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Code dynamics

Code	The total number of codes	First transcript	Final transcript	Difference
Psychological complaints	451	115	35	80
Cognitive disorders	345	131	12	119
Exhaustion	322	128	27	101
Emotional disorders	291	134	57	77
Psychosomatic complaints	245	136	76	60
Mental distancing	195	87	28	59

In order to verify the reliability of the dynamics of emotional burnout symptoms, in the second stage of the study, a statistical or null hypothesis (H0) was derived from the research question and results: there is a relationship between the symptoms of emotional burnout and digital storytelling, the alternative hypothesis (H1) was also adopted: there is no relationship between the effectiveness of digital storytelling and the reduction of the symptoms of emotional burnout. According to the qualitative interview, the results of the second stage of the study were analysed using continuous comparison analysis. Summarizing and analysing the results of the second stage of the study, it can be concluded that the alternative hypothesis can be rejected and the null hypothesis can be assumed: this means that there is a relationship between the symptoms of emotional burnout and digital storytelling. The plausibility of the change was tested in sample sets related to the Student's t-test and it was found that the change in the obtained results before and after digital storytelling is statistically significant ($\alpha \leq 0.05$).

Conclusions

Although there are several significant limitations to this study (the study was conducted in a small group of respondents and within only one higher education institution), the conclusions of the study are significant in several ways. Firstly, the number of studies on really effective intervention measures to reduce the emotional burning of students is relatively large in the world, but no such studies were found in the context of Latvia. Therefore, the results of this research are important precisely in the Latvian higher education area, provide an evidence-based strategy, which can improve the quality of life in general, effectively guiding and reducing students' thoughts about emotional burnout. Namely, expanding students' strategies for managing emotional burnout. Secondly, since there are few studies that have similar objectives to this study, the conclusions of this study could serve as a kind of stepping-stone and a call to action in terms of thinking about the students' emotional well-being and the teacher as the leader of this process. This could encourage and guide further research in this area, where the emotional well-being of students is not the focus of pedagogy. Thirdly, the findings of this study have shown that digital storytelling as a method of pedagogical support could be appropriate for certain typical problem situations. The methodology is not complicated, it could be learned by each educator. In addition, this study focused on a subset of a very important population – the student population, where communication is an important part of the development content.

The results of the study allowed to formulate recommendations for the implementation of digital storytelling in the higher education area. Since

these pandemic-related stressors are not likely to end soon, as the post-pandemic period in people's emotional and mental health is predicted to be a very complex phenomenon, stress reduction measures should be the focus of attention of people themselves, teachers, educational management and legislators. It is underlined that, as early as 2022 and beyond, psychological science will play an increasingly important role in the debate on how to address the world's most challenging issues. The main ones are emotional burnout and stress (Thayer, 2021). So the urgent need for mental health services is on this list and will remain on it for many years to come. The results of this study confirmed that digital storytelling can be one of the effective tools for solving this problem. As a result, a number of recommendations emerged: (1) to develop curricula and incorporate digital storytelling into teacher education curricula or professional development curricula, (2) to develop and implement learning processes and teaching materials in a way that promotes adequate learning capacity for students, and (3) to explore the possibility of providing independent support staff to universities.

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