

The Power Of Storytelling in Improving Students' Emotional Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The emotional well-being of students in the higher education space as a subject of the research forms is an important part of the research both in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and as well as before and after the pandemic. One of the dimensions of research is students' emotional well-being in performance-oriented curricula. Performance-orientated curricula include the acquisition of interdisciplinary competencies that can reduce students' subjective indicators of emotional well-being. In turn, storytelling as a method of pedagogical support has confirmed its effectiveness. Therefore, the research focus of this study is students who are studying in one of the programs of the performance-orientated subgroup; the study context is formed by the period of the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the research is to identify the effectiveness of storytelling as a method of pedagogical support in promoting students' emotional well-being.

This article presents the results of a case study in one higher education institution in Latvia. Qualitative approach has been selected for the research. Once a week during four-month period, 12 participants shared stories about their current issues. Session transcripts were encoded and then analysed in the qualitative data processing program NVivo 12. The results of the research were interpreted within the framework of the theory of self-determination. The transcripts of the sessions identified all the indicators formulated within the theory of self-determination: competence, relatedness, and autonomy, which were improved using storytelling. The results suggest that study courses on stress and emotional burnout management should also be included at the higher education level, which would allow to increase students' skills to manage uncertainty situations. This study is a small, but research-sensitive indicator for promoting student well-being.

Keywords: higher education, NVivo, performance-orientated learning process, storytelling, students' emotional well-being

Introduction

The COVID-19 era has unexpectedly introduced adjustments to the implementation habits of various processes, which in turn has changed the focuses of understanding of processes and phenomena, thus clearly highlighting weak points and points for discussion. The student population was considered a particularly sensitive group long before the pandemic era. In turn, due to the pandemic, the burden on students' mental health has increased for various reasons. This statement is supported by research results around the world, namely, that the COVID-19 crisis has increased the risks to students' mental health, including in performing arts pedagogy, where individual lessons and presence have been an important additional component due to the minimal use of technology in the learning process. This situation raised various risk registers and challenges in the implementation of the learning process, strongly demanding to quickly find alternative ways of learning due to the global crisis. The described problem allows us to call the situation a student well-being crisis, so resources are needed to improve the situation.

The learning experience of students in higher education is shaped by the learning environment and communication (Barden & Caleb, 2019). Students' well-being is an essential part of the learning process also at the higher education level (Bücker et al., 2018), as the absence of well-being can be the reason for poor academic performance (Geertshuis, 2019). Additionally, the lack of support for maintaining well-being can limit the student's performance and involvement, the consequences of which may be related to drop out and achievements in the future professional life (Turner et al., 2017). At a general level, higher education is about developing a 'whole and integrated person' (Keeling, 2014, 144). Educators, on the other hand, play a key role in organizing an effective learning process that promotes students' well-being, thus encouraging power to flourish as professionals and responsible citizens (Okanagan Charter, 2015; Medne & Jansone Ratinika, 2019).

The ideological focus of this study was determined by the case when students had a chaotic, disproportionate and uncertain workload during the first lockdown (2020. Marth – 2020. June) of the COVID-19. Due to the existing inconsistent organization of the learning process, they needed emotional support. For this reason, the students initiated the creation of an emotional support group. In order to deal with the situation effectively and professionally, the methods of providing psychological support in a critical situation – in a sudden and uncertain change of the learning process, in addition to being feasible in a remote format – were sought. Storytelling was identified as one of the methods for expanding students' psychological resources (Medne, 2022). According to the described situation, the purpose of the study was determined: to identify the benefits of storytelling as a pedagogical support method in promoting students' emotional well-being. The

well-being of the students was determined as the subject of the study, the choice is justified by an empirically based argument that in promoting the subjective quality of a person's life, more attention should be paid to the promotion of positive aspects than to the reduction of negative aspects (Huppert & Whittington, 2003), because exactly this focus of intervention and research has a positive effect on health literacy and life expectancy.

Storytelling as a tool, its use procedure

Storytelling is becoming an increasingly important tool for those working with vulnerable and sensitive population (Botfield et al., 2017). In order to make complex messages easier to understand, storytelling is increasingly used in various industries as a tool both to educate and promote the change of certain behaviour patterns, as well as to improve the ecology of relationships. This is because many resources are allocated to storytelling as a tool in theory (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007; Liehr & Smith, 2014): it creates a healing experience, promotes self-expression, mutual learning, lets you know your vulnerability, share your emotions and experiences, promotes feeling, promotes emotion management skills. In addition, purposeful dialogue between generations is emphasized as an essential storytelling resource, thus ensuring the ecology of relationships, increasing involvement, including in civically responsible activities (Liehr & Smith, 2014). Which is an essential resource, because in the context of Latvia, the COVID-19 pandemic also brought up an active discussion about civically responsible behaviour. The resources of storytelling as a method clearly define the place of the teacher as an emotional support person in the educational process, which provides for an expanded interpretation of the pedagogical mastery of the university lecturer, including marking the teacher as the determining human resource in the implementation of civic education (Medne et al., 2021), which is currently being used in the space of higher education, defined as cross-cutting competence.

In order to use storytelling effectively, Guber (2007) offers a storytelling model that contains four rules or truths:

- 1) be true to yourself, thus expressing your deepest and truest attitudes and values,
- 2) be true to the group, making the time spent valuable, meeting the needs of all,
- 3) being true to the moment (COVID-19 pandemic in this study), and
- 4) being true to purpose so that the story reflects the involvement and input of the storyteller, strategies for promoting well-being in this study.

These four steps, within the framework of the study, are determined as the ideological basis in the constructs of student support group stories. On the other hand, the topics and content were freely chosen by the students.

Methodology

In order to achieve the aim of the study, an action research methodology of a qualitative approach was chosen. The choice was determined by the focus of the specific design options, namely, that such research designs allow to study different types of problems and their solutions from different angles, as well as the frame of professional development of practitioners and the educational focus, because they ensure the progress towards a better understanding of the research participants in relation to the discussed topic and the spoken meanings (Koshy, 2010). Within the framework of this research, the focus of self-education and self-improvement has been identified as the most important. Within the framework of the study, students reflected on their own and other students' well-being, according to their feelings in the context of learning during COVID-19. In turn, qualitative research design is suitable for research within the educational framework (Lodico et al., 2010), because it allows to obtain various information about the pedagogical process provided by the perspectives of teachers and students (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Additionally, the field of data obtained in qualitative research includes the study of the experiences, attitudes, interpretations, concepts, feelings, and opinions of the involved subjects (Lodico et al., 2010). Student well-being is subjective, in order to understand the students' experiences and their mutual relations, the qualitative approach was chosen, which ensured that it is possible to identify the individual in the collective. Within the framework of this study, the researcher and the participants of the study collaborated in order to be able to construct, as a result of this cooperation, a frame of vision for the well-being of the participants, which could identify recommendations for improving the learning process. Such a methodological focus has been established, as research in the education sector is beginning to focus attention on the issues of quality improvement (Medne, 2022).

The combination of research focuses in the study is designed according to the funnel principle – from the widest to the narrowest.

Table 1. Study Exploratory Focuses

Identified focuses in the study	Focus type
Well-being	Context
Self-improvement (educational)	Interventional
Quality frame of the educational process	Methodological

Study procedure

The study procedure was carried out within one higher education institution, in the student population during one semester. Storytelling techniques consisted of a series of steps: for four months, once a week, 12 participants shared stories that they thought were important to them. The content and form of the stories were not limited, the students chose freely. Sessions were arranged remotely using the Zoom platform. The stories of each session were recorded, then transcribed, and the transcripts were coded. Students in the transcripts were coded, each assigned a letter code (from A to L). The story set consisted of 216 transcripts. An array of data to be processed, for the analysis of transcripts, justified the choice of the qualitative data processing program QSR NVivo 12.

The data obtained were analysed in two stages:

Stage 1. Transcripts were imported into the NVivo 12 program and analysed using qualitative and quantitative contextual analysis. The choice of NVivo was determined by the recognition that its use increases the validity of the qualitative study (Siccama & Penna, 2008). Transcript processing and analysis was implemented in the following order:

- 1) preparation of transcripts in Microsoft Word;
- 2) import of transcripts into NVivo file;
- 3) deductive coding of transcripts into NVivo file;
- 4) according to the code structure created in the context analysis, interpretation of content.

The choice of deductive coding was justified by its conceptual scope, namely, that it provides, in its essence, structure and correspondence to a theoretical frame. This is a top-down approach in which the first step is the identification of a set of codes: within the framework of this research, the identification of a matrix of categories of student well-being, and the second step is the identification of codes in transcripts. The set of codes for identifying well-being in transcripts was determined in accordance with Noble and McGrath (2015), who in the educational context offer seven components for explaining the content of well-being:

- 1) Positivity – optimism, a range of positive emotions, humour;
- 2) Relationship – ecological relations;
- 3) Outcomes – a sense of competence, individual success;
- 4) Strengths – awareness of one's strengths and the possibility to develop them;
- 5) Purpose – the existence of a goal, a sense of meaning in life;
- 6) Engagement, according to the authors, this is one of the most important aspects of education;
- 7) Resilience – the ability to adapt to changes, to survive failures and disappointments.

Thus, the strategy of this study consists of moving from the general to the specific: from the theoretical to the practical, studying the set of components of well-being in a new context: in the context of COVID-19.

Stage 2. The plausibility of the change in the well-being criteria was tested in sample sets related to the Student's t-test. In order to test the dynamics of the well-being criteria, a null hypothesis (H0) was formulated: there is a connection between the increase in the well-being criteria and storytelling; and the alternative hypothesis (H1) was accepted: there is no connection between the effectiveness of storytelling and the increase in well-being.

Research ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical aspects: informed consent was obtained from the study participants, the respondents were informed about the voluntary principle of participation in the storytelling group, the participants were informed about the principle of confidentiality, as well as the right to terminate their participation in the group at any time.

Respondents

The group was set up on the initiative of the participants and participation was voluntary. The group consisted of students of one semester. So, the type of study sample: the typical sample. The same number of participants ($n = 12$) started and ended their participation in the group, the composition of the participants remaining unchanged.

Results

The first step in data processing was quantitative contextual analysis, so deductive coding was performed to identify the criteria of well-being in transcripts and to fix the range of number of codes. Deductive coding identifies all the codes identified by Noble and McGrath (2015). The transcripts as a whole ($n = 216$) yielded the following range of all codes (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of codes in all transcripts

Code	Total number of codes
Positivity	189
Relationships	256
Outcomes	167
Strengths	223
Purpose	134
Engagement	195
Resilience	205

The largest number of codes consists of Relationships ($n = 256$), followed by Strengths ($n = 223$), followed by Resilience ($n = 205$), then Engagement ($n = 195$), then Positivity ($n = 189$), then Outcomes ($n = 167$), and the smallest number of codes is Purpose ($n = 134$). Thus, it can be concluded that the students' well-being frame consists of all the components specified in the theory.

In a further step, qualitative content-analysis was implemented, which led to the conclusion that the content load of all codes conceptually overlaps with three criteria of the theory of self-determination: Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, thus, can identify the content units – *sense* – presence in transcripts. This makes it possible to assume that the existence of meaning is an essential background for well-being. This conclusion is consistent with other studies (Weinstein et al., 2012, Martela et al., 2018). So, it can be argued that the results of this study offer some empirical support for this theoretical approach.

As a result of qualitative content analysis, it can lead to specific conclusions that the author of the study considers to be significant for Storytelling resources:

- in their stories, the participants position themselves and their experiences in a classic story circle, without even knowing the theoretical framework about it. The story circle allows you to improve the storyteller's skills, which is an essential component of the educational focus;
- all the stories of the participants included a set of subjectively diverse interpretations of situations. This is because they were able to represent themselves, which created an opportunity for many to meet themselves for the first time with the true self. This conclusion is characterized by respondent U: *I am already 21 years old, and I really understood the causes of my actions for the first time. I feel really confused because I think I know myself and always act consciously;*
- for five participants, the reflexive experience of sharing stories of their own experiences turned out to be empowering, as described by respondent F: *I feel that I was born a new person, they call it maturation – I don't know, but I know that I can face new challenges, even cathartic, as described by respondent O: I have such a relief, I really look at things differently, and I feel brave, strong and free, pleased, even if hurt by saying "no";*
- two respondents discovered that they spoke openly for the first time about an experience that had not been previously formulated, described by respondent D: *I spontaneously spoke for the first time, I always reflected on what I will say, also at the beginning of our conversations I carefully prepared. It's so relieving that you can say what you think and nothing's gonna happen to you.*

In the next step, code dynamics were captured in the first and final transcript of the program (Table 3).

Table 3. Dynamics of the number of codes

Code	Total number of codes	First transcript	Final transcript
Positivity	189	71	118
Relationships	256	125	131
Outcomes	167	85	82
Strengths	223	57	166
Purpose	134	52	82
Engagement	195	51	144
Resilience	205	84	212

Comparing the number of codes in the first and the final interview, it can be concluded that of all the well-being codes, during the storytelling intervention, these codes increased the most: Positivity (from 71 to 118), Engagement (from 51 to 144), and Resilience (from 84 to 212).

In this study, a specific phenomenon in code dynamics was identified as a result of the content-analysis, that not only the number of codes has changed during the intervention, but also the content of the codes has changed significantly, which respondents describe as follows:

Respondent X code *Positivity* – (first transcript) *I don't know what to be happy about all the time, it doesn't sound good* (final transcript) *there is also a satisfaction at last for that remote singing. I think I could never like it, but if the lecturer finds the right approach, it's a pleasure to have remote learning and remote singing too.*

Respondent Z Code *Strengths* – (first transcript) *I'm ashamed, I've never been so weak,* (final transcript) *surprised at myself; I can handle it, I can finally talk about this inability of mine.*

In order to check the reliability of the dynamics of well-being codes, in the second stage of the study, hypotheses resulting from the results of the first stage were formulated: there is a connection between the increase in the well-being criteria and storytelling the alternative hypothesis (H1): there is no connection between the effectiveness of storytelling and the increase in well-being. Since the results of the second stage of the research are obtained using an interview, the data selected for dynamic analysis were analysed using continuous comparative analysis. The reliability of the changes was checked with the Student's t-test of related sample groups, and it was found that the changes in the obtained results before and after the storytelling intervention are statistically reliable ($\alpha \leq 0.05$). Analysing the results of the second stage of the study, it was concluded that the alternative hypothesis can be rejected, and the null hypothesis accepted: this means that there is a connection between the increase in the well-being criteria and storytelling.

Discussion

Despite the fact that this study has several limitations (territorial, numerical limitation), the conclusions of the study are significant from various angles. First of all, there are relatively many studies on really effective intervention techniques that would promote students' well-being in the world, but no such studies were found in the context of pedagogy in Latvia. Research and project reports on the promotion of students' well-being in the education space of the given country were searched using open access databases: PubMed, ResearchGate, SciELO, Cochrane Library, Campbell Collaboration, EppiCentre, ScienceDirect, SpringerOpen, and Academia, as well as a database of published doctoral theses. Literature units were searched using Boolean search operators. The absence of evidence-based resources allows us to conclude that the results of this study offer an evidence-based strategy that allows improving the quality of life in general by effectively guiding the students' cognitive position on well-being. This, in turn, makes it possible to increase well-being as a state of personality. Because it is the existence of strategies to increase well-being that contribute to people's quality of life (Huppert & Whittington, 2003). So, it can be concluded that storytelling is a method that expands the repertoire of well-being management strategies of the students. Secondly, the conclusions of this study could be a step and a call for purposeful action regarding the focus of students' emotional well-being. It is emphasized that this is especially effective if a comprehensive approach to well-being is developed using the so-called "whole university approach" (Seldon & Martin, 2017; Baik et al., 2016). Thirdly, the results of this study have highlighted that storytelling could be a suitable method for solving typical situations, the methodology of which is not complicated, every teacher could learn it. Furthermore, this study focused on a very important subset of the population – the student population wherecommunication is an important part of the development. Thus, the costs of its acquisition and implementation could save financial resources in the future, already at a later stage as mental health treatment. Therefore, fourthly, it is justified to conclude that the connection between students and teachers at the level of higher education is insufficiently studied (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The results of this study show that ecological relations between students and teaching staff contribute to the well-being of students in the higher education environment, even in a difficult situation for all parties involved. The results of this study are consistent with those of other studies, such as

- 1) when higher education also enables supportive and active student-centered learning and assessment experiences that treat students as a "whole person" rather than an indistinguishable part of the student body (Morgan & Houghton, 2011).
- 2) Also, that the pedagogic mastery of the teacher is the dimension that determines both the students' well-being and professional growth (Medne, 2022).

Perhaps the next research focus could be the study of the emotional state of university teaching staff, because, as concluded, they are an important resource in promoting the well-being of students. Fifth, the use of storytelling can be equally important for both practice and research. If it is important for practice that the effectiveness of the used techniques has been tested in research, then empirical studies benefit from a well-grounded way in which the method enables empirical materials in research. Research designs in the educational sciences that do not take into account the experience, understanding, and freedom of action of those who will be the subject of the study are likely to be less effective than studies that do.

Conclusions

This article examines the storytelling as a pedagogical support tool in practice, its resources for improving the quality of educational practice, and outlines ideas for further research. The beginning of the COVID-19 era significantly affected the well-being of various population groups, including the particularly sensitive student groups. According to the actualization of the problem, this article proposes and empirically tests the assumption that the seven components of well-being – Positivity, Relationships, Outcomes, Strengths, Purpose, Engagement, Resilience – will change using storytelling as a pedagogical support tool. The obtained results confirm the assumption. The results also allow us to conclude that the content of well-being is related to the basic idea of the theory of self-determination, namely that self-expression, through autonomy and competence, as well as ecological relations with other people, gives meaning to life, thus making life worth living. Which is a valuable insight, especially in expanding the coping resources of vulnerable groups, thus increasing the likelihood of increasing their personal, professional and civic effectiveness. Looking into the future, the beginning of the COVID-19 could be an opportunity to systematize empirically proven strategies to promote economic and sustainable investment of financial resources to promote and maintain people's mental health.

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Dace Medne is a professor and researcher at the Jāzēpa Vitola Latvian Academy of Music in the Art Education department.

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