Embedding Mental Wellbeing: Methods and Benefits Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021

Embedding Wellbeing in the French Language Curriculum

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Rationale

As French Language Director and Deputy French Language Director, we have both noticed that our students arrive at university and are displaying lower levels of subjective wellbeing, often report feeling stressed and anxious, and find the French language curriculum at university much more challenging. They told us that they found the gap between A-levels and Year 1 challenging for some aspects of the French language. This has been confirmed by the research carried out by Fabienne on what makes students flourish and languish at university and what the key challenges experienced by young people are (Vailes, 2017, Thompson & Vailes 2019).

Research has shown that wellbeing is linked to learning[1]. Houghton and Anderson (2017) have highlighted how considering the links between mental wellbeing and learning when designing and teaching the curriculum can foster and promote the notion of equitable success for all students and staff. With this in mind, we worked with the teaching team of Year 1 French Language and decided to embed wellbeing into all the activities carried out during and outside of the compulsory French language module, which consists of three hours of language teaching a week.

Method

We started by canvassing the team's thoughts and ideas during the academic year 2018-19 to see how we could improve the student experience as well as theirs.

Armed with this precious information, we started designing a new curriculum of which the main aim was to support student wellbeing. The key theories underpinning this work have been Larcombe et al (2017)'s 5 wellbeing essentials. Their work draws from Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) and Bandura's work on self-efficacy (Bandura 1994, 1997).

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[1] www.bloomsbury.com/uk/be-well-learn-well-9781352010688

We particularly liked the visual used on page 8 of Larcombe et al's handbook.[2]
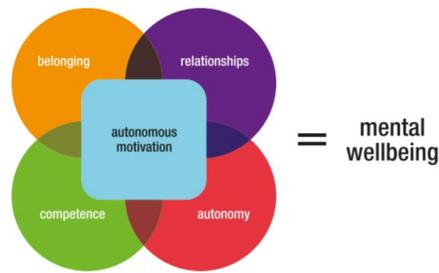
- **Autonomous motivation** – we are autonomously motivated when we do things because we find the activities intrinsically interesting or satisfying, or when we believe our actions will facilitate valued goals
- **Belonging** – we experience belonging when we feel that we are accepted and valued by others within social groups and organisations
- **Relationships** – we experience positive relationships when we trust, rely on and care for others and experience others trusting, relying on or caring for us
- **Autonomy** – we experience autonomy when our actions, tasks and goals are self-chosen and self-concordant (authentic), rather than imposed or controlled by others
- **Competence** – we experience competence when we are able to manage the interactions, tasks and challenges that we face

The students were offered a task-based syllabus that encouraged them to engage in meaningful language learning activities and foster collaboration and cooperation (Gautam 2019). A task-based approach also enabled students to develop their cognitive skills (Sanchez 2004) which supported critical thinking and autonomous learning.

Evaluation

We surveyed our students and staff via an online survey (onlinesurveys.ac.uk). 79 students (50.5% of the whole Year 1 language cohort) took part in the survey. All teaching staff provided us with feedback.

We intended to carry out qualitative interviews in groups in TB2 of the academic year 2019-20 but this was stopped by Covid and we were unable to carry them out.

The feedback from staff was extremely positive in all elements of wellbeing essentials, but especially in **autonomous motivation and competence**.
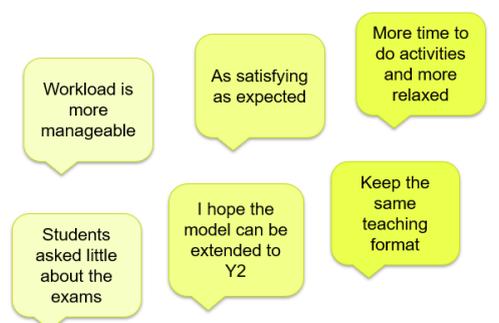
From the student feedback, we appear to have managed to develop a stronger sense of belonging, positive relationships, and autonomy. **88.8%** rated their level of **autonomy** between 6-10 (70 students) - **83.6%** rated **sense of belonging** between 6-10 (66 students) and **71%** rated **positive interpersonal experiences** between 6-10 (56 students). The responses were much lower for autonomous motivation and competence. **64.1%** rated their level of **competence** between 6-9 (50 students); **64.6%** rate their level of **motivation** from 6-10 (51 students).

More specific comments from students may provide us with some suggestions on what was driving some of the students' responses to the survey:

During the academic year 2020-21, we took the feedback given by students and improved the Year 1 French Language curriculum further and, whilst we are currently happy with the results and the fact that the feedback provided by Year 1 rep students during the Student Voice Forum for the academic year 2020-21 has been overwhelmingly positive, this research is simply the start of a continuous endeavour. More needs to be done to understand more fully the link between autonomous motivation and the sense of competence and to see how we will be able to best support our students in the future. We will also move to embedding wellbeing into the French language curriculum for Year 2 and Year 4 whilst remembering that it is an emerging and reiterative process that will be constantly evolving with the cohort and the feedback received. We find it particularly interesting that staff were more intrinsically motivated and felt more competent but that these items were the lowest scorers for our students.

To find out more about this project – you can read the article in International Association for the Educational Role of Language (ERL Association - ERLA)

Take-away message

A systemic approach to embedding wellbeing is key. We need to involve all stakeholders in education if we want to see real flourishing.

A flourishing education = flourishing students AND flourishing staff. One cannot happen without the other. It's a reiterative and generative process. Not a 'done once, it's sorted' approach.

I highly recommend the article, Fabienne and Imogen Moore wrote for Advance HE
www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/systemic-approach-key-embedding-wellbeing

Please do not hesitate to get in touch with us if you have any further questions:
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