



Pink Suit Pedagogy: Wellbeing and Self-leadership in Curriculum Development

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Abstract

Individual and collective wellbeing are important considerations in the face of future challenges imposed by rapid technological development. This paper examines the curriculum development at Finnish Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences from the perspective of student wellbeing and self-leadership. The new curriculum, introduced at Haaga-Helia UAS in 2022, is reflected against the three dimensions of learning stated in the OECD Learning Compass 2030 [1] as follows: cognitive, social and emotional, and metacognitive skills. The methodological approach of the study is qualitative and the investigation is anchored in teaching practices. Content analysis is used to highlight themes in students' course journals. The outcome of the Wellbeing and Self-Leadership course suggests a need for introspection and calm comfort in a competitive academic environment. A holistic understanding of wellbeing enhances studies in general and empowers the learning community.

Keywords: curriculum development, self-leadership, OECD learning compass

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the curricular reform at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences from the perspective of overall student wellbeing. Apart from traditional academic courses, the new Haaga-Helia 2022 Curriculum also puts an emphasis on transversal skills such as time management and wellbeing and self-leadership.

In a fast-paced and competitive environment, it is important to strengthen the students' self-image and feeling of agency. By introducing a mandatory module called "Keys to Studies and Career" with course titles such as "Recognise and Communicate Your Strengths", "Time Management" and "Wellbeing and Self-Leadership", students are encouraged to slow down to consider fundamental values and to find mechanisms for coping with the demands of everyday life. For a career-oriented business student this might not always be easy.

We will examine the outcome of the "Wellbeing and Self-Leadership Course" implemented in spring 2023 by giving a voice through their course journals. In traditional academia, cognitive skills are trained, whereas little attention is paid to embodied inquiry: "How do I feel today? Why am I out of breath? Why is my heart beating so fast?"

2. Transversal Skills

Transversal skills are defined as: "Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organizational skills)." [2]

Finnish National Agency of Education [3] have defined six areas of transversal competencies, naming well-being competence as one. Well-being competence is defined as follows: Caring for oneself and others; recognition and utilisation of own strengths; identity construction and grit and resilience in a world of change and surprises.

Additionally, there is also a collective dimension to well-being [1] presented in the next chapter. The notion of collective and individual well-being, as implied in the Learning Compass, is that individuals must acquire the skills to collaborate towards a shared goal for the benefit of the community.

2.1 OECD Learning Compass

Presently, with global developments and advances in technology, education faces a major necessary change in terms of curriculum development and methods and objectives. The OECD Future of Education and Skills project has addressed these challenges by creating an educational framework named The OECD Learning Compass 2030 [1], with focus on: student agency, core foundations,



transformative competencies, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, and anticipation-action-reflection cycle.

The educational framework could be used as orientation towards the future and navigate the need for education to let students thrive into responsible, mature citizens who will ensure the future's wellbeing and sustainability of the world. Moreover, the local authorities could implement it in creating better education for students and guide students into acquiring the skills and competencies they need for a desired future. The main purpose of the Learning Compass is to lead us through our journey to individual and collective wellbeing.

2.2 Self-Leadership

Self-Leadership is generally regarded as a transversal skill necessary for succeeding in university studies and work life. Manz [4] defines self-leadership as “process of influencing oneself to establish the self-direction and self-motivation needed for effective performance”. It was first defined by Manz, [4] as self-management and subsequently developed into self-leadership [6]. Maykrantz and Houghton [7] have shown that self-leadership practices decrease students' stress and proposed self-leadership to be used as a tool. Manz and Sims [5] have reported that every individual should have some principles to manage their behavior and evaluate their performance. Self-leadership is also evident in the Learning Compass, where values are defined as “guiding principles” by which people guide themselves in making decisions and striving for improvement in accordance with a definition presented by Haste [1].

3. Well-Being and Self-Leadership Course

Well-being and self-leadership skills hold an important role in post-Covid tertiary education. Currently, students are facing numerous mental health challenges due to the constantly changing environment. Over time, universities have taken a proactive role in creating projects and programs to improve student's mental health and wellbeing [8]. However, the evidence of the impact of these programs and projects has not been thoroughly researched. Therefore, the questions remain about the efficacy of the programs and students' participation.

Universities in Finland organize courses for wellbeing and life skills, offer group and individual counseling, support wellbeing by events as well as arrange peer support chats. Additionally, information and tips are provided at The Finnish Students Health Support (FSHS) and The Finnish Central Association for Mental Health (MTKL).

Haaga-Helia UAS recognizes the importance of wellbeing and self-leadership in its curriculum development. The first edition of the contact implementation of the Wellbeing and Self-Leadership course offered in the Degree Programme in International Business (IBBA) was implemented in spring 2023. Fourteen students attended lessons regularly, whereas ten students chose to study the material independently without showing up in class. This ratio reflects the post-Covid situation in Finnish universities where attracting students back to campuses has proven challenging. In some course journals students named anxiety in group encounters as a reason for not attending classes. However, several students welcomed the in-classroom discussions in a safe and relaxed atmosphere.

3.1 Reflections on well-being and self-leadership in course journals

Upon examining the course journals by content analysis, there seems to be a dichotomy between academic studies and well-being studies based on embodied inquiry. As expressed by a student:

“At first when I attended the class, the whole course seemed so ridiculous.”

This initial ridicule stemmed from not focusing on academic topics, but rather on the well-being of body and mind instead. Yet, the same student learnt to appreciate the opportunity for introspection as a break from a tight academic schedule:

“The reason of my enjoyment was that I wasn't required to submit any assignments or exams, I was just only required to bring myself and my emotions into the class.”

In several course journals, students welcomed the opportunity to reflect upon pillars of wellbeing such as sleeping and eating habits, meaningful relationships, exercising routines and time management skills. A student voiced the importance for defining one's own limits as follows:



“Saying no has always been a problem for me. I am really a people pleaser...”

Furthermore, the competitive nature in modern study and work life is echoed in some journals as indicated in the following quotation:

“I’m capital VERY busy, I’m overloading myself consciously and mostly manage, but it overloads my head and I have breakdowns at home or bad days because of that. My ambitious nature makes me push to the limits to achieve ‘perfection’.”

Finally, the purpose of this type of course is to signal to students the importance of embodied inquiry for recognizing physical and emotional needs in a stressful environment. As summed up by a student:

“We should be more open-minded towards the world and ourselves, that’s the thought that stuck me after the course.”

Such open-minded stance was also represented by a picture shown in class, portraying male ballet dancer Atte Kilpeläinen wearing a pink tailcoat to the official Independent Day Ball. This pink suit is manifested in the title of this paper as a metaphor for wellbeing and good self-esteem.

4. Discussion

With the introduction of a Wellbeing and Self-Leadership course, Haaga-Helia UAS has recognized the need for supportive measures and student empowerment in its new curriculum. As indicated in the course journals, students welcomed the opportunity to reflect on intrapersonal skills. Yet, now it is time to bring in the teacher’s perspective into the discussion. Examining the dichotomy between academic subjects and wellbeing courses, this is also evident in practice as implied by the following: While a standard academic course at Haaga-Helia UAS is 5 ECTS credits, the Wellbeing and Self-Leadership course only gave 1 ECTS credit. This had practical implications since the group only met for 45 minutes weekly, i.e. eight sessions in all. From the instructor’s angle, it would be challenging to create a safe environment for every single participant within such a tight time frame. Even if many students perceived the atmosphere safe, one student noted that “being afraid of people’s judgement” made the lessons feel unsafe for some students. This might have been avoided by more time for bonding at the beginning of the course.

There is a significant imbalance between being allocated 5 credits or 1 credit for a course; as if it were less important to learn soft skills. Thus, students unconsciously perceive hard skills, such as financial mathematics, as more important than looking into mind and body for visceral wisdom. Yet, with burnout increasing among young adults at the beginning of the career ladder, it is of paramount importance to teach wellbeing and self-leadership for a more sustainable future work life.

5. Conclusion

Introducing a wellbeing and self-leadership course into the new Haaga-Helia curriculum has been an important step in curriculum development. The next step would be to allow more time and resources for developing transversal skills as presented in the Learning Compass [1] throughout all courses in the curriculum. The primary objective for an educational organization is to inform learners of the Learning compass capabilities, while yet being applicable to local contexts. In a technological world we need to cherish and develop skills that are unique for humans. However, the problem with these transversal competencies is that they cannot easily be measured and assessed by metrics. However, this does not imply that these skills should receive a diminutive spot in the curriculum – or being altogether left out. In the long run, there should be the courage to give more space to slow-paced introspection in tertiary education.

To conclude in the words of a student:

*This course in my opinion was really calming and refreshing.
[...] ...it helped me to be more relaxed in school surroundings, where I usually feel stressed. And at the same time, I was able to learn more about myself and the values that I have in me.*

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