Using Appreciative Inquiry to Understand the Role of Teaching Practices in Student Well-being at a Research-Intensive University

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Abstract

Appreciative inquiry (a research approach comprising four stages: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny) was used at a research-intensive university to investigate which teaching practices positively influence student well-being (i.e., their health and quality of life). In a survey, undergraduate students were asked to select the teaching practices they believed best supported their well-being. Focus groups also were conducted, with: (1) students, and (2) instructors identified by students as using teaching practices that supported their well-being. Mixed-methods data-analyses subsequently were used to identify instructional strategies that support student well-being.

L'enquête appréciative (une approche de recherche qui comprend quatre étapes : découverte, rêve, conception et destinée) a été utilisée dans une université centrée sur la recherche pour enquêter sur les pratiques d'enseignement et déterminer lesquelles influencent positivement le bien-être des étudiants (c'est-à-dire leur santé et leur qualité de vie). Dans un sondage, on a demandé aux étudiants de premier cycle de choisir les pratiques d'enseignement qui, selon eux, favorisaient le mieux leur bien-être. Des groupes de discussion ont également été organisés, avec (1) des étudiants et (2) des instructeurs identifiés par les étudiants comme étant ceux qui employaient des pratiques d'enseignement qui favorisaient leur bien-être. Ensuite, les données ont été analysées selon des méthodes mixtes pour identifier les stratégies d'instruction qui favorisent le bien-être des étudiants.

A large body of evidence indicates a high prevalence of mental health concerns among university students, and that these concerns are having a negative impact on students' academic performance (Cash & Bridge, 2009; Wasserman, Cheng,& Jiang, 2005). While teaching practices that promote learning in higher education have been identified (Dennison, Gruber, & Vrbsky, 2010; Moulding, 2010; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014), little is understood about how these practices promote well-being in higher education (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013; Keyes et al., 2012; Martin, 2010). Well-being is defined as a state in which individuals realize their potentials, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and are able to contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2014). The goal of this 2-year project was to understand how teaching practices affect the well-being of undergraduate students. Undergraduate students were studied as they constitute the majority of the post-secondary student population. To keep the scope of this project manageable, undergraduate students from the faculties of Arts and Science were chosen, as they comprise approximately 60% of the undergraduate population at the university (UBC Overview & Facts, 2015).

The research team adopted Appreciative Inquiry as the core methodological approach for the project. Ethics approval was obtained from the university ethics board (approval number: H15-02023).

Appreciative Inquiry

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) asserted in their seminal work that organizations as socially-constructed realities are shaped by the forms of inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry(AI) has been shown to be effective in educational research by focusing on strengths to build capacity (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009). The four stages of AI are discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Shuayb et al., 2009). In keeping with the strength-based approach of AI, this study focused on identifying and recognizing practices that promote well-being so that we could later encourage their use on campus. This project followed the four key stages of AI (Figure 1) (Avital, Cooperider, Zandee, Godwin, & Boland, 2013; Shuayb et al., 2009).

Data Collection

Discovery: Survey of Mental Health, Well-being, and Teaching Practices

In the Discovery stage, the goal was to identify and recognize teaching practices that are instrumental to student well-being. To gather student input, we developed a survey and distributed it to all undergraduate students via email in February 2015. To develop the survey, we identified ten teaching practices that were known to be effective at promoting learning using Ambrose's (2010) on smart teaching as well as Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (Indiana University School of Education, 2017a), National Survey on Student Engagement (Indiana University School of Education, 2017b), and harnessing expertise of the research team and the university's centre for teaching. These teaching practices were hypothesized to also promote well-being (see the Appendix). For each of these practices, study participants were asked to indicate (a) how often they had experienced each in the previous year, and (b) to what extent each teaching practice positively promoted their well-being. Students were asked to note additional teaching practices that positively contributed to their well-being. The final question on the survey asked students to list specific instructors who supported their well-being. This question was included to identify instructors to interview for the *Dream* phase of the project.
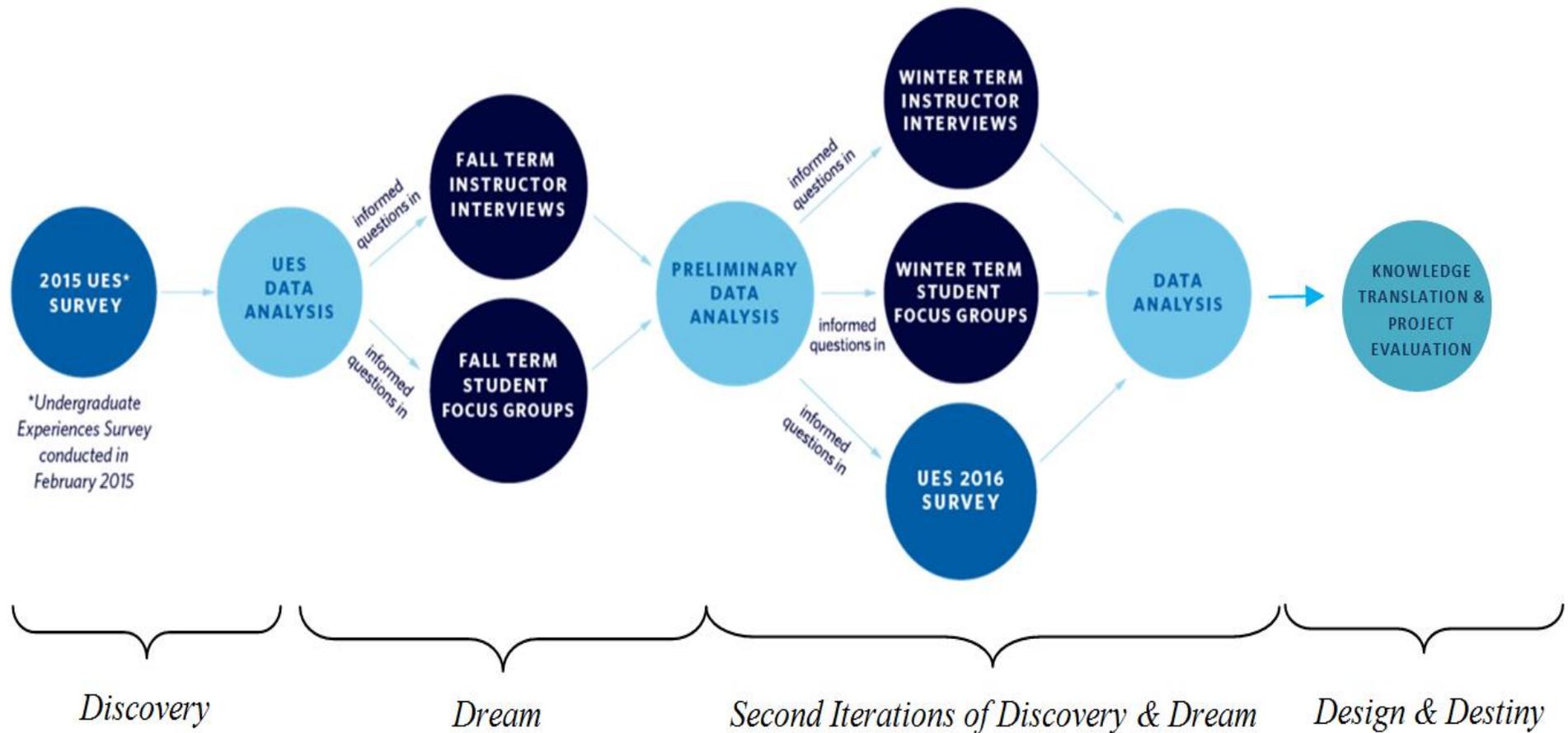
Figure 1. Research method and project process.

Among the 41,365 undergraduate students (UBC Overview & Facts, 2015), 5591 students responded to the quantitative questions. Descriptive statistics indicated how frequently the ten teaching practices were used and the impact they had on student well-being. Approximately 2000 students provided qualitative input. Inductive content analysis of the qualitative data suggested that a wide variety of teaching practices promote student well-being (Bazeley, 2013). Finally, approximately 4000 students identified one or more instructors who supported their well-being.

Dream: Using Survey Results to Inform Student Focus Groups and Faculty Interviews

In the Dream stage, focus groups and interviews were conducted to further inform and generate an ideal vision of teaching practices that promote student well-being. The focus groups and interviews were held in two phases: phase 1 was conducted during fall 2015 and phase 2 during winter 2016. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2015 Fall-term student focus groups. Students were invited to participate in focus groups through digital signage and announcements; interested students applied to participate through an online form. First-year students were excluded from the study due to lack of university experience. Open-ended questions were developed and used during student focus groups to solicit input regarding teaching practices that promote student wellbeing.

2015 Fall-term instructor interviews. We conducted nine semi-structured interviews with instructors whom students identified as supportive of their well-being. As the number of students varied from small upper-year seminars to multiple large first- or second-year lectures, instructors were selected based on (a) total number of nominations received, and (b) proportion of the instructor's students who nominated them. Instructors were invited to participate in an interview, and they were asked about (a) the teaching practices that they believe support student well-being, (b) their motivations for using these teaching practices, and (c) what resources would support the continued improvement of their teaching.

2016 Winter-term student focus groups. Four additional focus groups with 4-5 students each were conducted. For phase 2, focus group questions were modified to get more specific input about the themes that emerged. For example, in phase 1, students indicated that peer connections were important, but did not specify how instructors could foster this. Thus, we specifically asked about this in the winter term.

2016 Winter-term instructor interviews. For the seven interviews conducted in phase 2, we added a question to gain insight about the five themes that emerged from student input: (a) connections with peers, (b) connection with instructor, (c) engagement with subject matter, (d) clear expectations about how to succeed, and (e) a safe and supportive classroom environment.

2016 student survey. To get a better sense of the relative importance of each teaching practice for promoting well-being, constant-sum questions were used; students allocated 100 points across the 14 teaching practices, allocating more points to teaching practices that they felt promoted their well-being (See Figure 2). Four more teaching practices have been added to the 2016 survey based on student feedback in the 2015 survey.

Results

Design

After analyzing data, three themes emerged as important teaching elements that promote student well-being:

- Belonging & social inclusion: Students' well-being is supported when they feel connected to their instructors and peers.
- Learning well: Students' well-being is supported when they are motivated to learn and when they feel that they are learning effectively.
- Whole student: Students' well-being is supported when instructors recognize that students have lives outside academics.

Based on findings and detailed examples of teaching practices identified, knowledge translation tools such as infographics, videos, and a checklist were designed.

Destiny

With understanding how teaching practices affect the well-being of undergraduate students as the goal, this project's destinies are to strengthen the capability of instructors, and build momentum around student well-being promotion through teaching practices. This project is currently at the Destiny stage where we are actively reaching out to faculty and instructors about teaching practices that promote students' well-being, and evaluating effectiveness of knowledge translation implementation.

Limitations

We recognize that the 2015 survey included double-barreled questions (e.g., the instructor created a supportive and safe class climate) in the quantitative section; these were removed for the 2016 version. The constant-sum question used in the 2016 survey with 14 items proved taxing for the students to complete, as the first teaching practice on the list was awarded 100 points more often than the other teaching practices, suggesting that students gave up answering after the first question. We recommend future studies to use a Likert scale with small intervals in lieu of constant sum questions. While asking for qualitative input via the survey generated a large number of responses, we experienced difficulty interpreting the qualitative comments as the answers were often very short and not descriptive (e.g., "Be inspiring").
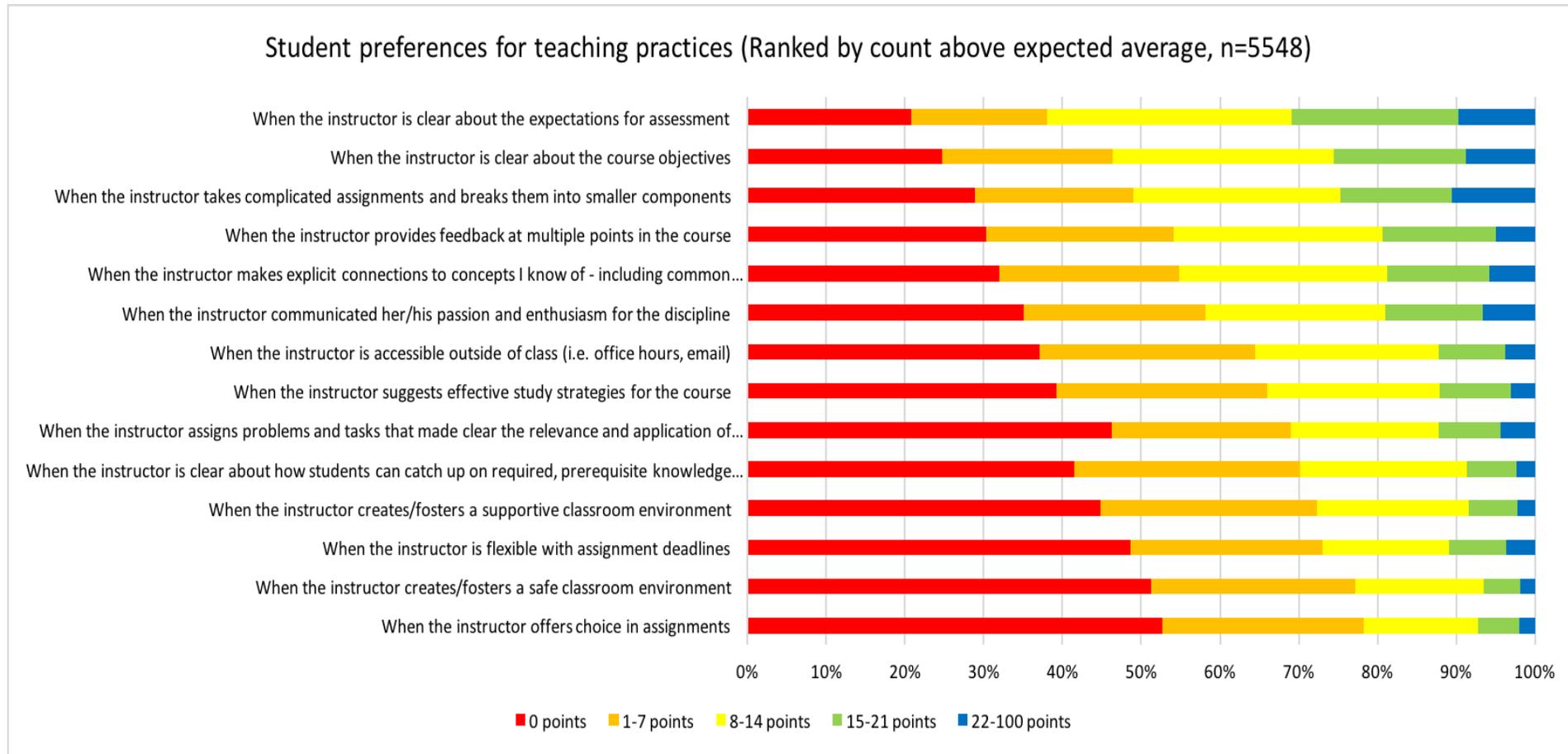
Figure 2. Constant-sum questions and analysis.

We acknowledge the self-selection bias in student surveys and focus groups, limited sample size for both the interviews (16 participants) and focus groups (29 participants in 7 focus groups), and that focus group and interview participants were recruited from only two faculties. Students who chose to complete our surveys may have held stronger views on teaching and wellbeing than other students. Because of this, our participants could have voiced opinions that do not reflect those held by the entire undergraduate population. Therefore, our findings are not generalizable to all undergraduate students. Additionally, the subject matter taught in each faculty is different, and it is likely that some subjects may be better taught using certain teaching practices. Finally, we acknowledge that the teaching practices were self-selected by students, so they may not necessarily be beneficial to student learning or well-being.

Conclusion

Appreciative inquiry into teaching practices that promote student well-being provided valuable insights into how instructors play a direct role in influencing student well-being. In the Discovery stage, teaching practices that positively influence student well-being were identified. Ideal teaching practices identified were listed and organized in the Dream stage, and knowledge translation plans together were designed. Evaluation of the project is currently underway to investigate whether we are approaching the destination of improving student well-being by educating instructors about these evidence-based teaching practices.

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Appendix

2015 Survey

Research shows that student success is highly dependent on overall health and well-being. To help us understand the teaching practices that foster student well-being, we'd like to learn about the experiences you have had in your courses that you feel had a positive impact on your well-being. When we say well-being we mean all aspects of your emotional, mental, and social health.

1) How often have you experienced the following teaching practices in your courses this academic year? (Hardly ever, Occasionally, Sometimes, Frequently, Almost Always)

- The instructor asked for input from students regarding learning needs.
- The instructor took large/complicated assignments and broke them into smaller components.
- The instructor made explicit connections to prior learning, or familiar concepts and/or student interests.
- The instructor was clear about how students could catch up on required, prerequisite knowledge they were missing.
- The instructor provided tools to help students organize their knowledge in a meaningful and logical way.
- The instructor was clear about the course objectives, learning activities, and expectations for assessments, and how they inter-related.
- The instructor suggested effective study strategies for the course.
- The course included a mid-term evaluation of teaching and the instructor discussed the results of this in the course.
- The instructor provided feedback at multiple points in the course on assignments, assessments or class learning (e.g. clickers, self-assessment tools), including prior to the drop/add deadline.
- The instructor created /fostered a supportive and safe class climate.

2) To what degree do the following teaching practices positively impacted your well-being? (Students were asked about the same 10 teaching practices; options for response were: Have not experienced/Not applicable, Not at all, Very little, Somewhat, To a great extent)

3) What additional teaching practices, if any, have a positive impact on your well-being?

4) Please list the specific professors and/or Teaching Assistants who you believe have supported your well-being as a student.