

Building Resilience Through Self-Care: Art and Aesthetic Wellness

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Abstract

Into the second year of the pandemic, most educational institutes have made adjustments in order to continue the delivery of courses and programmes. Some regions have resumed a kind of normality and returned to face-to-face interaction for regular classes, and some regions may have adopted a hybrid mode to facilitate better communication with students. No matter what the actual implemented mechanism is, educators over the world have come to realise that rethinking “education” is necessary, in terms of the mode of delivery, as well as the value and kind of education we are offering to students. Besides reflecting on the mode and nature of education, another consensus among educators is the need to enhance students’ resilience, both in formal education and informal curriculum. This paper is a proposal on building resilience of university students through co-curricular activities, focusing on self-care. Young people in higher education sector are going through the threshold of adulthood, and this period is already full of challenges about personal identity and value. The pandemic is only a reminder to us of the importance of this core component for university students in their education. The proposal here is to use art as an indirect and informal learning experience to guide students to better self-care.

Keywords: Aesthetic Experience, Emotional Wellness, Playback Theatre, Personal Stories, Connection

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Introduction: What is not new in the new normal?

Since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, different sectors of life have been looking for ways to manage the disruptions caused, at first temporarily, but later also to prepare ourselves for a world and life permanently changed because of this prolonged and extensive disruption. For the past 24 months or more, the global society has been through different stages of the pandemic, with varying situations and individual strategies to cope. In the education sector, the most immediate and obvious disruption was the day-to-day teaching and learning activities across all levels. When social distancing measures were implemented, schools and universities responded by shifting the teaching and learning activities online, and adopting a hybrid mode for skills/courses to which physical interaction is absolutely essential.

Two years on, impact of the pandemic on education is not simply a matter of finding an alternative mode of conducting classes and communicating with students. All other learning activities that are conducted outside classroom are also affected; if these activities are deemed essential to whatever aspects of development students are involved with, they will probably be moved online together with the core teaching and learning, if not, they will be postponed or cancelled. The decision of whether to postpone or cancel an activity/event, especially in view of the uncertain development of the pandemic, is therefore not just a decision about a more convenient date, it is in fact a decision about the nature and value of the activity/event, and the role it is playing in the context of the educational experience being offered.

That is why discussions about “the formulation of a ‘new normality’ in higher education” (Mok et. al., 2021, p. 1) involve the immediate issue of maximizing e-learning in different disciplines, but also related issues such as the cognitive and emotional behavior of students in various learning environments, and more fundamentally the overall wellbeing of students when they are adjusting to the changed social environment and learning practices. A change in the mode of interaction among people in the educational setting affects not only the volume, but also the quality and value of the interaction. It has a knock-on effect on many other aspects of the higher education experience, and over time, global educators come to realise that the change of teaching and learning mode is in fact a starting point to “re-think and even re-design higher education” (Mok et. al., 2021, p. 1).

One of the student learning activities that has been suspended by the pandemic is overseas exchange. Mok and his team did a study about the effects of the pandemic on Hong Kong and Mainland university’s internationalization endeavor, as well as students’ decisions about overseas exchange opportunities, and found that both had been hugely impacted. The massive reduction in international travel means that both in-bound and out-bound student movement is minimal, and it is not just a matter of lower numbers during the pandemic. In the student survey with Hong Kong and Mainland students, it was discovered that “whether the university can provide sufficient support to students’ security and wellbeing will become an increasingly important factor for prospective international students for their decision in studying abroad” (Mok et. al., 2021, p. 3). While the prestigiousness of the academic programme or institution had been the priority for students seeking international learning experience in the past, the pandemic has induced a change in the sequence of consideration factors, and international institutions’ investment in student wellbeing has become a key consideration.

In 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO) initiated the Mental Health Atlas project,¹ to fill the gap in global information on mental health resources and services. Since then, mental health issues have been more visible and are discussed globally but the actual government policies and resources input vary with different places. While it is generally recognized that mental health is closely related to physical health, and that mental health issues have directly and indirectly accounted for loss in productivity in the global economy, its impact on life's different dimensions has never been more obvious than now. In the world's new normal where people are cut off from their usual support system, "mental health implications of COVID-19 has identified a heightened prevalence of moderate-to-severe self-reported depressive and anxious symptomatology among the general public" (Grubic et. al., 2020, p. 517).

While it is easy to understand that loss of jobs or unequal access to medical and social support are factors leading to the heightened prevalence of anxiety overall, the pandemic as a stressor to young people and school children needs more attention. Grubic et. al. quoted one survey by YoungMinds UK which "reported that 83% of young respondents agreed that the pandemic worsened pre-existing mental health conditions, mainly due to school closures, loss of routine, and restricted social connections" (Grubic et. al., 2020, p. 517). It is not only changes in daily educational routines that causes anxiety, but also decisions in major educational events that affect cohorts of students. In Hong Kong, for example, the university entrance examination (i.e. Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education) in 2020 was postponed for a month, and some of the papers were shortened and marks were redistributed. The same examination in 2021 had also adjusted the marks allocation to different papers of a subject.

It was also observed by many students and educators alike that the overall teaching and learning quality had suffered during the pandemic. In Hong Kong, those who entered the university in September 2019 as freshmen hardly had any face-to-face interaction with the professors or their fellow classmates in these three years, and for those who joined the university as senior year students in September 2019, not only did they not have much chance to make use of campus facilities, they might also have had a virtual graduation ceremony, or one in hybrid mode and much reduced attendance. Here I am not criticizing any decisions made by the authorities, but merely pointing out the kind and extent of disruptions caused to university students (in Hong Kong) even though they did not face the kind of economic and social stresses that adults faced during this time. Educators in other parts of the world also call for more action and research about mental wellbeing in students, to prioritize "the disturbances to educational progress, adaptations of habitual coping strategies, and approaches academic institutions have taken to reduce adverse academic and psychosocial outcomes" (Grubic et. al., 2020, p. 517). In fact, the importance of mental wellbeing in students is not something new in the new normal.

Art and Aesthetic Wellness: The Museum, Stories, and Everyday Life

Same as the fact that mental wellbeing is not a new issue in the current new normality, the possible contribution that art can make to establishing mental wellness has also been a topic of discussion and research for a long time. While it has long been claimed that experiencing art can relieve stress, development in neuroscience research has made concrete connections

¹ A second edition of the Mental Health Atlas was published in 2005. It was found that there was not a great improvement in the provision of mental health services between 2001 and 2004.

between the aesthetic experience and areas in the brain that send positive feelings to the person (Chatterjee, 2004; Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014; Mastandrea et. al., 2019). Researchers have been trying to look into various kinds of aesthetic experience, such as that of static visual arts, visual experience with a duration, or other kinds of aesthetic experiences, to understand how they may have a direct or indirect impact on the subjects' emotions. Mastandrea's team was one of many that studied the effects of viewing art in the museum on one's moods, and confirmed that the aesthetic experience "affects mood, therefore promoting health and well-being" (Mastandrea et. al., 2019, p. 2).

The range of studies on art and its effect on people's wellbeing have implications about the role of art in everyday life, as well as a more specific function in education. It was suggested that the "[m]useum environment and artifacts offer an extraordinary aesthetic experience that allows the recollection of positive memories" (Mastandrea et al., 2019, p. 2), and therefore museums and art galleries have much to offer in terms of enhancing mental health for the general public. The location, which in most cases are open to the public and easy to access, becomes a site where memories are made and shared. Individuals of different age groups and circumstances may find the site (together with the exhibitions) a place where pleasant feelings collide and have positive meanings that are personal, especially for the elderly if the museum-related experience is part of their daily life practices.

Various studies about the role of museums and art galleries have given educators much to think about in terms of eliciting their help in community well-being and for educational purposes. One study with a group of young women visiting an art gallery focused on the kind of artwork that yields the most fulfilling aesthetic experience revealed that figurative art provides better relaxation/restorative effects than abstract art (Mastandrea et. al., 2019, p. 2). This may be useful information as to how art-based learning (ABL) can be conducted either using the museum as a site with its art display, or creating an aesthetic experience in other educational settings for healthcare education specifically to enhance wellbeing. In fact, "studies reviewed so far demonstrated that the aesthetic value of artwork and their use in educational programs may affect psychological and physiological states, thus promoting well-being and enhancing learning" (Mastandrea et. al., 2019, p. 3).

Camic & Chatterjee observed that in the past decades, museums have changed a lot in the role they play in the community. They are "more aware of the needs and interests of their local communities while also expanding the types of activities offered, including the development of in-house programmes and outreach activities to those who are often socially excluded from participation due to a range of exclusionary practices and circumstances" (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013, p. 66). This is important not only in attracting patronage, but also in how museums are ready to play a more proactive role in addressing public health issues such as mental health problems for different age groups, and health education in general. Camic & Chatterjee commented that they have become "agents to increase social inclusion and reduce socially excluding practices across communities, by providing environments and processes to re-examine behavior, attitude and beliefs" (p. 67).

How are they increasing social inclusion and enhancing wellbeing? Museums are locations accessible to the general public, and modern museums have interactive exhibitions which involve object-handling and mutual sharing of experiences among viewers. The investment in a more personal approach in the display, such as making use of narratives, has also made the overall museum experience more intimate and relational, and therefore facilitating a reflective response towards the experience. Studies have also confirmed that the best positive

emotional enhancement activities in the museum are “object-handling” and “viewing paintings” (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013, p. 67) because they provide a link to personal stories and experiences, while offering a pleasant aesthetic encounter. In fact, the pleasant feeling of viewing aesthetically pleasing objects is not limited to artwork in museums, but is found in encountering beautiful objects in daily life (Yeh et. al., 2015).

The story is a key component in our daily communication, in both external communication with other people and internal communication with our own self. The function of narratives as a bonding mechanism for groups of people is already well-established in academic studies, and telling or sharing stories have generally been accepted as having a therapeutic effect on individuals. In a study with a group of elderly men, it was found that regular opportunity to talk and share personal stories – to reminisce – “is highly associated with pleasure, security, health, and a feeling of belonging to a place” (Chiang et. al, 2010, p. 381). Over the 5-month period of the study, reminiscence “successfully improved the participants’ depressive symptoms” (Chiang et. al., 2010, p. 386). It was concluded that “reminiscence can help ease the pain of isolation and loneliness. Memory is used as a therapeutic intervention to help validate a sense of self” (Chiang et. al., 2010, p. 387). Indeed, we make connections with people and places by sharing our stories, and we feel we belong if we have common experiences. In this respect, human beings are unique beings like no other because we get through our lives using stories.

Taking Care of Oneself through Sharing Stories: Playback Theater on Campus

With reference to the above discussions about the current mental health challenges to university students, and various findings about the role of aesthetic experiences on wellbeing, I am going to report on co-curricular activities that I and my team have conducted with university students in Hong Kong. In response to the pandemic situation, and the fact that students (among others) are feeling isolated and lost because of the suspension of many co-curricular activities, I applied for a grant to conduct creative learning activities for students of Hong Kong Metropolitan University. Our project, entitled *Pandora’s Box: A Multimedia Creative Project on the Gendered Self* (<https://www.instagram.com/pandorasbox.plus/>) started in August 2021. Now we are in the middle of the project, and despite the many challenges, we feel that the experience has been a positive one for our participants and ourselves.

The overarching theme of the project is sharing stories, in particular stories relating to one’s experience of gender. We designed three main artistic learning experiences for the student participants (around 15), i.e. a 30-hour Playback Theatre core training workshop, an installation art workshop, and a song and lyric writing workshop. Each of these artistic learning experiences results in a piece of artwork created by the students, which will be items on display in a final grand exhibition. Members of the university as well as the community are invited to attend the interactive and personal final exhibition on campus. Although Playback Theatre already has more than 40 years of history, in Hong Kong it is still not a widely known practice, and also not an event happening in the university regularly, therefore we also conducted a few story-sharing activities, as well as inviting a professional group to present a Playback Theatre showcase as student recruitment preparation.

The workshops were organized in October 2021. At the time, the pandemic situation in Hong Kong was relatively stable, and the semester actually started with hybrid mode teaching and learning, and on-campus activities were allowed if precautionary measures were observed.

We held a body-exploration workshop (15 October), a women stories workshop (21 October), and the Playback Theatre Performance by a professional group (22 October). The recruitment process was much harder than we expected, ironically not because of the pandemic, but because students were not used to sharing stories – especially when we say that we are focusing on stories about gender. I believe that this difficulty has to do partly with the theme (i.e. gender), but also because of the extended period of isolation that (university) students have lived through. Being face-to-face with other people, and sharing stories, in an educational context, is either a thing of the past, or something they may not have experienced at all. This is exactly the reason why we feel that the project is necessary.

The following are some observations about the story-sharing workshops.

The body exploration workshop was to facilitate participants' connection with their own body. Very simple body movements and exercises were used to draw attention to the way we move and carry ourselves in everyday life. This workshop was a standalone session to remind participants the bond between the mind and the body, and how emotions are manifested in different ways through the body. Getting familiar with communicating with our body is also an important preparation for students to receive the Playback Theatre training. The instructor commented that most of the participants had not thought about the body and mind connection in their daily life practices, and they were also not very sensitive to the body's movements and behaviour in details. When the instructor invited sharings from participants about their relationship with the body, they were also not very forthcoming. We assume that because the group is a mixed gender group, and with students ranging from 18 to 60+ years old, they were not accustomed to this kind of personal sharing.

The women stories workshop was the occasion to share gendered sensitive personal experiences. We hope that this will arouse attention to gender expectations in our society, participants' own responses to these expectations, as well as cultivate an interest in different personal stories and awareness of the values these stories carry. Participants were encouraged to select and share their own experiences verbally in a group setting. The instructor observed that the ability to choose and share personal stories varied greatly among the group. It was assumed that academic background had played a part (e.g. the creative writing students were better at telling stories and finding interesting contents, and other students could hardly compose a structured narrative). We also saw a difference among students in their sensitivity, how they understood the meaning of the experience, and how much the experience could be used to reflect certain values in our society.

A playback theatre performance by a local professional theatre group was arranged on campus. Despite the reputation of the theatre group, only 25 participants registered for the event and finally 13 students turned up for the interaction. After this series of workshops and the performance, participants were given a 5-question google feedback form to complete, so that we have some idea about how they view these story-sharing experiences. The 5 questions refer to their experience in the activity, whether these events (i) enhance their interest/knowledge in Playback Theatre, and (ii) enhance their awareness in gender issues, whether they (iii) increase their interest in artistic expression, and finally whether participants (iv) feel connected with themselves after the event, and whether they (v) feel connected with others after the event.

The feedback from participants on these five issues are very positive. The body exploration workshop received ratings of 93% to 98% fulfilment, the women stories workshop received

ratings of 100% fulfilment, and the Playback Theatre Performance received 91% to 98% fulfilment across the 5 issues of the project's concern. The google form also included a section where participants could add any other comments they had about the experience. A sample of these comments include:

- i. "feeling touched by family stories"
- ii. "realise the need to face one's own experience"
- iii. "aware of the body and the need to cooperate with it"
- iv. "feel more relaxed"
- v. "learn to have a conversation with oneself"

These remarks reflect a generally positive response from participants, in the sense that the experience touches on something that is not normally discussed in regular classroom learning, and may not be covered even in general education courses. The fact that these participants invested their time outside classroom to engage in the series of activities is the best indicator that the sharing of personal stories, and the artistic experiences are meaningful journeys for them beyond their academic pursuit.

Connection, Confidence, Courage: Resilience against Isolation and Helplessness

Playback Theatre is founded by Jonathan Fox, after his attendance at a psychodrama in New York in 1973, watching Zerka Moreno in action. In his words, he witnessed "a true community theatre. Here was theatre that made a difference. Here was emotion. Here was often stunning beauty" (Fox, 1999, p. 10). Inspired by this, he created the Playback Theatre, "a theatre of a very particular kind – without scripts, personal, informal. [He] directed groups in enactments. [He] worked eagerly with all sorts of groups, including very young children, the handicapped, the elderly, and people on the street" (Fox, 1999, p. 9). This theatre for everyone is led by a conductor, who is like a master of ceremony. The conductor interacts with the audience, invites them to tell their personal stories, and guides the actors to enact those shared stories with the help of the musicians. After each enactment, the teller comments on the performance, and then another audience comes forward to tell his or her story.

Playback Theatre has all the important features of making connections, which we felt were ideal to university students because of their being at an important gateway in life. While they are acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to establish themselves in the professional world, there are no parallel training in terms of understanding themselves and their relationship with the greater society. The playback theatre experience emphasizes empathetic and non-judgmental listening, respect, and authenticity, which is a transformative and educational experience for young people who are still finding themselves and seeking a place in the world. We hope that the elementary training in playback theatre skills could cultivate the skills of deep listening, self-expression, mutual respect and social awareness among them. As Fox remarked, he wanted "to investigate the relationship between the personal story enacted in a social setting and the "stories" of the culture, including its history. [His] hope is that the playback ritual could play a part in healing some of the injustices and upheavals of the past that fester not only in individuals, but in whole societies" (Fox, 1999, pp. 14-15). We believe these are values and skills that young people need in order to live a good life.

Here I would like to share a few observations about the students' engagement with the playback theatre training, and their subsequent showcase. I believe these are obvious indicators of the value and meaning of such a teaching and learning intervention for university students.

Connection is one of the key takeaways participants revealed to us. They were pleasantly surprised by how the activities put them in a situation where they had to connect with themselves and other people. Some participants said that they used to be very isolated and kept themselves to themselves. Although they were not used to making connections at first, through the intensive training, they had learned ways to connect (e.g. deep listening) with other people, and more importantly they had cultivated a willingness and intention to connect with other people, to listen to their stories, and to become fellows with each other.

Confidence is another feedback mentioned by most participants. In the training process, they had to pay attention to what everyone was saying, as well as their body language. The complete communication approach allowed participants to have 3-dimensional information about the others, and this made everyone more willing to share what was in their minds. The “transparency” in turn made everyone feel more confident because they knew what was going on in the setting, and the non-judgemental approach emphasised by Playback Theatre training relieved them of anxiety about their own inadequacies. They felt much easier to accept themselves and accept others.

Courage is another quality quite a number of participants revealed that they had acquired. Among the group, only two had some regular theatre experience – most of the participants had absolutely no idea what Playback Theatre is about. In fact, even the instructor applauded their courage, for signing up to such an intensive and intimate experience. Their initial courage in joining the programme rewarded them with even greater courage to face themselves and the readiness to learn more about themselves in the future. For a few of the participants, the change after the training and showcase experience were quite remarkable.

Conclusion: Making Art Part of the New Normal Life

Numerous studies have pointed out the value of the aesthetic experience. It is “an exceptional state of mind which is qualitatively different from ‘normal’ everyday mental states. In this mental state, a person is fascinated with a particular object, whereas the surrounding environment is shadowed, self-awareness is reduced, and the sense of time is distorted” (Marković, 2012, p. 12). The experience of art is not only a cognitive interaction between the individual and a piece of work, but “a self-rewarding activity, irrespective of the emotional content of the artwork” (Mastandrea et. al., 2019, p. 4). Although the exact operation of the emotional mechanism is still to be determined, many researchers have already confirmed a relationship between the aesthetic experience and indicators of a range of positive emotions. As a result of such findings, there have been proposals to involve museums, art galleries and other related venues in the overall project of enhancing mental health and wellbeing across different age groups.

In the two years of global experience with the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health once again comes to our attention as a core component of quality of life. Ironically, it is while the world is struggling to cope with the new normal that we realize that one of the essential foundations of a good life has always been emotional wellbeing (Stoewen, 2017, p. 861). From my experience with a group of university students in Hong Kong, the enhancement of emotional wellbeing can be achieved through an interactive aesthetic experience. The Playback Theatre training and performance experience they went through gave them the opportunity to share their personal stories, in the form of standardized artistic theatre language, to recognize their shared challenges and feelings, and to consolidate a sense of identity within themselves and in relation to others. This aesthetic experiment confirms much

of what researchers have found, that “aesthetic experience comes to full fruition by inducing emotions in the individual and by prompting an evaluative judgment” (Yeh et. al., 2015, p. 152). Students have come to learn not only to reflect upon themselves, their connection with fellow human beings, but also the social and cultural contexts in which their life is situated. I have every reason to propose making aesthetic experience such as the Playback Theatre to be a part of normal educational life of students. As suggested by Stoewen, forming a new habit does not require much brain energy, it is only “self-awareness and strategies” that we need (2017, p. 862). The education sector should be able to facilitate this in the new normal, to address an eternal core of need.

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