Reacing for Wellbeing

Brief summary of literature and overview of findings from an online-survey investigating the extent to which students at the University of Warwick read to improve their wellbeing. Completed as part of the assessment for the IATL module 'Understanding Wellbeing: Theory and Practice.'

Context

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Various fields of study have seen a general increased interest in the relationship between reading and mental health which has been interdisciplinary in nature, with stakeholders ranging from charities, arts organisations, academics, psychologists, neurologists, medical researchers, among many others (Billington, 2019).

The Benefits of Reading—Literature Overview

Development: The OECD's Reading for Change project (2002) determined that recreational reading can have "a more powerful effect on cognitive development, educational achievement and social mobility than socio-economic status," (Billington, 2019, p.1).

Neurology: Experiments have found that the human brain responds to literary stimuli (Shakespearian texts) with a sudden 'electrical excitement' - interconnections between various areas of the brain responsible for linguistic and conceptual processing are stimulated. Reading "holds back the mind from superficial over-speedy decisions or habitual biases." (Davis and Corcoran, 2019, p.296).

Psychology: Reading fiction is useful for improving eudaimonic wellbeing (Corcoran and Oatley, 2019, p.332). It also develops reasoning skills (Stanovich and West, 1995). Mar et al (2006) found that reading fiction helps to develop emotional intelligence and the ability to relate to others, which is a key element of good wellbeing.

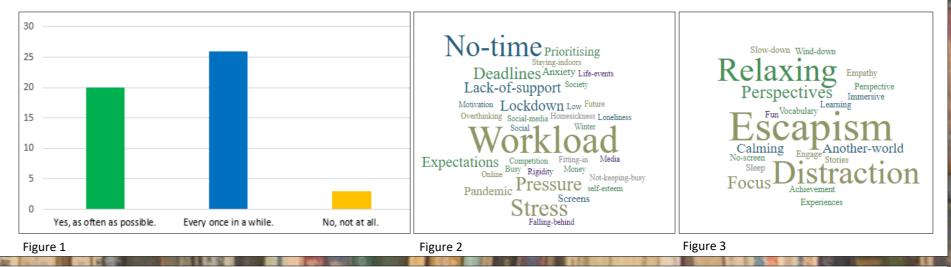
Flow : Reading can put readers in a sense of 'flow', which is considered as an 'optimal experience' that increases the ability to focus and to cope causing a release of dopamine (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) self-selected readings are most likely to produce a sense of flow (McQuillan and Conde, 1996).

Methods

The data was collected through an online survey which consisted of 10 questions, enquiring about what students do to improve and maintain their wellbeing and the extent to which they utilise recreational reading for this. 52 responses were received from students (44 female, 8 male) from a wide range of degree courses. These were then statistically analysed. The study received ethical approval from the IATL ethical committee.

Results

- Figure 1 shows a bar chart which displays the participants' responses to the question: In general, do you enjoy recreational reading?
- Out of 52 respondents, 48% (n=25) either 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree' on a 5-point scale, with the statement: 'My university work-load leaves me with enough time to relax and take care of my wellbeing.' which suggests that many students experience academic pressure and may have limited opportunities to take care of their mental health.
- 'Socialising with friends or family' was the most popular response to the question: 'What are you most likely to do in order to take care of your wellbeing?; . Reading received 20 out of 52 responses.
- Figure 2 shows a word-cloud which show-cases the most popular words and phrases which participants responded with to the openquestion: 'What do you think creates barriers to maintaining good mental health and wellbeing?' 'Workload' and 'No-time' were the most common themes.
- 54% of students (n=28) reported that they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the statement: 'I like to read in order to improve my wellbeing.
- Figure 3 shows a word-cloud which show-cases the most popular words and phrases which participants responded with to the openquestion: 'In what ways do you think reading benefits your wellbeing.' 'Escapism,' 'Relaxing,' and 'Distraction,' were the most common themes.
- 21 students reported that they either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the statement: 'My university and local area offer a wide range of opportunities to buy, borrow, donate, or exchange books at affordable prices.' 20 students said that they either 'neither agree nor disagree,' whilst 11 said that they either 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree'. This shows a mixed range of experiences, suggesting that some departments and facilities at the university are more efficient at providing such opportunities than others, suggesting a need for a whole-university effort to promote opportunities for obtaining books.



Conclusion

In general, it is evident that for many students, reading can help to maintain and improve their wellbeing by providing an opportunity for relaxation and distraction. Students are aware of the barriers to wellbeing and many reported that university workload often prevents them from maintaining wellbeing. It is important to note that the study only received 52 responses which means it is not possible to generalise the findings to the wellbeing habits of all students at the University of Warwick. However, the study provides justification for further study, as well as rationale for the university and departments to promote more opportunities for recreational reading.

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