

Student-Devised Assessment (SDA): Reading and Wellbeing, the extent to which University of Warwick students use wellbeing to improve and maintain their wellbeing.

Introduction

The focus of my SDA was the investigation of recreational reading and its impact on wellbeing among university students at Warwick. Personally, I always turn to fiction when I am feeling down; the aim of my SDA was to explore whether other students also utilised this. I achieved this through conducting an online questionnaire which was distributed to Warwick students. Furthermore, to explore gain further insight into the benefits of recreational reading, I also conducted a literature review to examine what is already known about this topic in interdisciplinary academia. I also aimed for my SDA to have practical applications, therefore I created a holistic overview of the topic through an academic poster.

In this piece, I will outline the key findings from my literature review, the methods and findings of my research and an explanation of the possible applications of my SDA.

Literature Review

In my literature review, I utilised sources from an interdisciplinary range of fields in order to gain a deeper insight into the benefits of reading. Various fields of study have seen a general increased interest in the relationship between reading and mental health. As mentioned, this interest has been interdisciplinary in nature, with stakeholders ranging from charities, arts organisations, academics, psychologists, neurologists, medical researchers, among many others (Billington, 2019).

A key piece of literature which is extremely valuable to understanding the concept of reading and wellbeing comes from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development who highlight the relationship between reading, development, and attainment. 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). This is a crucial finding, as research into economics and sociology is concerned with understanding educational inequalities and social reproduction, OECD’s claim that reading can have such a strong influence on the above factors reinforces the powerful relationship between reading and development. This is further explored by Bavishi et al (2016), who found that book readers potentially lived up to 23 months longer than non-readers.

Further support for the relationship between reading and mental health comes from neuropsychological research. Neurological experiments have found that the human brain responds strongly to literary stimuli, such as Shakespearian texts, with a sudden ‘electrical excitement’ – this occurs when interconnections between various areas of the brain responsible for linguistic and conceptual processing are stimulated. As explained by Davis and Corcoran (2019, p.296), reading “holds back the mind from superficial over-speedy decisions or habitual biases.” The fact that the benefits of reading are evidenced by neurological experiments further reinforces the relevance of my SDA and the invaluable effect of this on mental health.

Evidence for the benefits of reading also comes from psychological research. According to Corcoran and Oatley (2019), reading fiction is important for improving eudaimonic wellbeing. This type of wellbeing relates to finding happiness from virtue and “doing what is worth doing” (Ryan and Deci, 2001, p.145). This implies that reading fiction can provide individuals with long-term feelings of happiness and accomplishment, potentially due to the idea of books taking individuals on an immersive ‘journey’ of reading – this is a concept which was prominent in my research. Furthermore, reading, measured through exposure to print, 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 (Action for Happiness, 2016).

Reading has been linked with Czmistknys’s concept of the sense of ‘flow’ (1990). This takes place when an individual becomes immersed in an activity which requires high challenge and

high skills from an individual, flow has been linked with improving wellbeing, as it increases ability to focus, cope and also releases a dose of dopamine. Research by McQuillan and Conde (1996) has linked the concept of flow with reading, which has been described as an 'optimal experience'; the authors note that self-selected texts (not required academic readings) are best to evoke the sense of flow. This is particularly interesting as my survey found that 21% of students only read academic texts.

Whilst I was able to identify a wide range of literature, If I had more time to work on this project, I would also explore the extent to which the publishing industry utilises the growing interest in the recognised relationship between wellbeing and reading.

Methods

My questionnaire consisted of 10 questions, these have been attached as supporting documents to my SDA.

Due to the small-scale nature of my project and the limited time-frame, I used an online questionnaire as this is something which I have had experience with before. Bartram (2019) notes that questionnaires are a well-established form of data collection, particularly in social science research. The author also adds that using online survey platforms is advantageous due to the ease of distribution, I was able to provide my participants with an anonymous link to the survey, making it easily accessible. Prior to data collection, I received ethical approval from the IATL ethics committee (attached in supporting documents). I utilised social media to advertise my project (advert attached in supporting documents). I also emailed staff members in the university, including the IATL officer and the admin officer in my own department and asked them to send the link to my questionnaire to students.

I received a total of 52 responses, which I was happy with given the short time-frame. Although this is a relatively small number of participants and cannot be generalised to the whole-student population, it provides a contribution to understanding some general trends of the extent to which students use reading to improve and maintain their wellbeing.

If given the opportunity to conduct this project again, I would also collect data using qualitative methods, such as focus groups with students or individual interviews to gain deeper insights into what activities students use to maintain their wellbeing and how they perceive recreational reading to be beneficial.

Findings and Discussion

The key findings from my study have been displayed in the academic poster submitted as part of this assessment. However, the general trends show that most students (46 out of 52) enjoy recreational reading either as often as possible or every once in a while. Students were also asked to identify the main barriers to wellbeing; a lack of time, academic pressures, expectations, stress, anxiety as well as the current pandemic were most commonly identified. Students were also asked to identify why they think reading might be beneficial for wellbeing; distraction, escapism and relaxation were commonly reported. This links in with the identified literature, whereby the evoked sense of escapism caused by reading can put individuals in a sense of flow (McQuillan and Conde, 1996). As mentioned, 21% of students responded that they only read academic texts, suggesting that they do not utilise recreational wellbeing to evoke this sense of flow and escapism.

More details on the findings from the study have been displayed on the academic poster. It is important to acknowledge the methodological drawbacks of my research. Firstly, given the small-scale nature of my study, 52 responses constitute a relatively small sample size meaning it cannot necessarily be generalised to the entire student population. Furthermore, as noted in my ethics approval form, I asked participants to reveal which gender they identify with as well as what course they study, these personal details were asked in order to provide comparative angles within the study. However, I received 44 responses from females and only 8 from males, which makes it difficult to draw any accurate comparisons based on gender due to the low number of male respondents. Furthermore, the extremely wide range of degree courses reported by respondents made comparison of the uptake of recreational reading based on degree very difficult due to the short-time frame of the project. If given the opportunity

to conduct this project again on a larger-scale, I would draw more comparisons between respondents to provide a more accurate and representative understanding of the research area.

Applications

From my interdisciplinary literature review, I found that benefits that come from recreational reading are invaluable to maintaining wellbeing and my survey confirms that many of the surveyed students utilise reading for their wellbeing. Therefore, I believe the university should continue to promote opportunities for recreational reading. I have created an academic poster in order to display my findings around this topic and I hope that the target audience of my SDA – university students and departments – will accept my poster and display it, as well as encourage recreational reading; perhaps by providing opportunities for book-clubs, read-alongs, and platforms to share book recommendations.

In creating my poster, I used the guidance from Rowe (2017) which reinforced that an academic poster must promote and invite further discussion. Due to the physical constraints of the poster, I was not able to showcase all my findings and provide deeper analysis, however the visual presentation of the key findings and literature was presented with the aim of opening up discussion and providing opportunity to consider the benefits of recreational reading. Rowe also recommended the use of Microsoft PowerPoint to create the poster, however I personally found it easier to use Microsoft Publisher due to my familiarity with the software.

Conclusion

My SDA poster provides a visual and informative resource for exploring the relationship between mental health and reading and contains the views and experiences from the students at Warwick. Mental health and wellbeing are extremely complex concepts that require holistic interventions and interdisciplinary research. I believe that my SDA provides a valuable contribution to promoting wellbeing at university, the small-scale nature of my study means

that while the sample is not necessarily representative of the whole-student population, it provides some indication regarding the relationship between reading and mental health.

Word Count: 1639

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