#Take5 #47 The Best Way of Promoting Digital Wellbeing in HE?
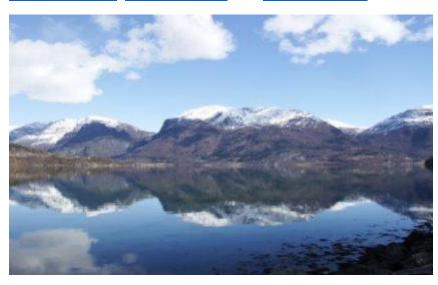
Happy new academic year! As many of us return to a COVID-HE, where we are still working from home – and wrangling our face to face courses into some form of active and creative online learning experience, we at #Take5 are pleased to bring you this blog post from Ben, Debbie and Anne of Bournemouth University exploring digital wellbeing.

Please have a read – leave a Comment – and think about offering a #Take5 blogpost of your own.

Beyond Google Garage

Ben Goldsmith, Debbie Holley and Anne Quinney, Bournemouth University, UK

Reflections: Image credit: Anne Quinney

Digital wellbeing is one of the fast-emerging 'hot topics' for HE, evident in its new prominence in the Jisc' digital capabilities framework. JISC, the UK's expert body for digital technology and resources in Higher Education, Further Education and research defines wellbeing as:

"a term used to describe the impact of technologies and digital services on people's mental, physical, social and emotional health."

How can digital competency frameworks offer a different approach to conceptualising student wellbeing?

Mirrored by the [EU digital capabilities framework](#), digital wellbeing is now starting to influence policy at national and pan-European level. An [analysis of these two frameworks](#) was carried out by Biggins, Holley and Zezulkova (2017); their work identified ways in which more nuanced approaches to policy implementation would pay dividends in terms of wellbeing outcomes for students. Notably, their work suggests that human learning, underpinned by technological tools, needs to be partnered by a focus on lifelong learning and continuous professional development.

At institutional level, [McDougall et al (2018)](#) argue human-centred approaches prioritising staff and students' immediate and lifelong wellbeing are key to success in developing policies for student wellbeing, rather than the mere use of digital tools. Digital wellbeing has taken on new dimensions and arguably greater importance in the adjustments being made to teaching and learning and to everyday life in response to Covid-19.

Numerous opportunities now exist for connecting, for socialising, for protesting, and for studying using online platforms; yet underneath there are challenges of the digital world for young people. These unfold in a myriad of ways: trolling and online-bullying; increased peer pressure for an instagram 'perfect' life and body image; and access and isolation.

Through our teaching and learning endeavours we know about inequalities in access to technology tools, and the health implications that studying on line can create, including the impact of social isolation on young people. We know there are increasing numbers of young people experiencing mental health challenges. [An EU project](#) has been set up to increase the capacity of lecturers and students to promote and practice digital wellbeing.

Digital wellbeing: more than a tool

Our recent work, ['The mechanics of digital wellbeing in HE: Beyond Google Garage'](#), presented recently at an internal virtual conference, explored the role we might as educators at BU play in promoting and ensuring digital wellbeing. Our starting premise was the images portrayed in the media of digital wellbeing.

Google digital garage, for example, is a suite of wellbeing tools, with an image of a white, early middle-aged woman with flowing blonde hair, drinking, presumably a

cup of herbal tea. The EU Digital Educators project has an image of a white, youthful man with a beard, smiling broadly as he engages with technology. A search of similar sites not only reveals a lack of diversity, they certainly don't portray the stress and mental anguish staff, and our students, may experience studying in isolation.

Images of 'digital wellbeing'

The staff perspective

The shift or 'tilt' to online teaching and learning has disrupted our familiar practices; in physical, practical and emotional dimensions. Academic staff have been required to adjust the ways in which they facilitate learning, embedding synchronous and asynchronous approaches from new spaces and stretching the boundaries of what constitutes the university.

For some this tilt to online as a response to Covid-19 has been a positive experience, reducing commuting time and increasing a sense of well-being as staff feel safer at home and appreciate flexibility of working.

For others it has been challenging, particularly those who have been home-schooling their children, caring for sick family members or struggling with poor internet connections and out-of-date equipment.

A recent paper by Nordman et al (2020) sets out some key areas of the debate about Covid-19 adjustments in higher education and suggests strategies for managing this 'tilt'. Issues of access and equality are identified by Heitz et al (2020), in the shift to remote learning. The first challenge is logistical, as educational establishments must ensure that students have access to basic technologies, wherever they are studying and regardless of their socio-economic status.

The student perspective

It has had a parallel impact on learners who have continued their studies in unfamiliar online learning spaces as programmes not originally designed for distance learning have been adapted as a response to Covid-19. Students have lost contact with each other and the physical resources universities provided to aid their academic and social interaction.

The National Union of Students (2020) conducted a survey during the COVID-19 pandemic which found that 20% of students struggled with access to online learning, with black, Asian and minority ethnic students, those from poorer backgrounds, care leavers, students with caring responsibilities and students with disabilities particularly impacted. 82% of students seek support from friends and family online, however only 18% are looking for self-help for wellbeing through digital apps.

What can we do?

Digital wellbeing frameworks offer insights into the wider, more holistic approaches to the student experience. However, they need to be designed for hybrid delivery, and to meet individual student needs. Pointing to self-help online guidance and apps, is, we argue, insufficient in itself, given that the most marginalised students already struggle to access robust internet connections.

The work by Heitz et al (2020) highlights the imperative for institutions to address students' social, emotional and human needs as a precursor to offering effective online study. Developing and nurturing students' sense of 'belonging' to their cohort, their disciplines and to the community at large requires adjustment of our previous on-campus practices. However, the principles remain the same – we need to:

- Care for the whole person;
- Model and enable safe, ethical and appropriate behaviour online and offline; and

- Reassure our students that their wellbeing is at the heart of our practice, especially in new and potentially unfamiliar digital spaces.

Link to slideshare here:

[The mechanics of digital wellbeing in HE: Beyond Google Garage Bu version digital wellbeing workshop](#) from [debbieholley1](#)

References:

Digital Wellbeing Educators Promoting the Digital Wellbeing of Students (2019) EU Erasmus Plus https://www.digital-wellbeing.eu/.

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Biographies:

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Debbie Holley is Professor of Learning Innovation at Bournemouth University. Her expertise lies with blending learning to motivate and engage students with their learning inside /outside the formal classroom, at a time and place of their own choosing. This encompasses the blend between learning inside the classroom and within professional practice placements, scaffolding informal learning in the workplace. She writes extensively the affordances of technologies such as Augmented Reality, Virtual/ Immersive Realities and Mobile Learning.
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Anne Quinney is the academic lead for the pedagogic theme of 'Assessment and Feedback' at Bournemouth University, based in the Centre for Fusion Learning, Innovation and Excellence (previously the Centre for Excellence in Learning) and is responsible for policy innovations to promote student-centred and research-informed assessment and feedback strategies. A recent initiative has been the Assessment and Feedback Toolkit. Anne's research interests include arts-based pedagogies and research approaches, including the use of photo-elicitation.
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