Addressing social and emotional learning: fostering resilience and academic self-efficacy in educationally disadvantaged learners transitioning to university

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Abstract

In recent years, the impact of mental health issues on university students' ability to successfully access, transition and participate in university has gained increasing attention. Mental wellbeing is of particular concern in pre-university enabling programs which often specifically target educationally-disadvantaged equity groups. It has become increasingly clear that in addition to 'academic skills', these students also need to be equipped with social and emotional skills that support their transition to university, as well as promote resilience, sustained motivation and academic self-efficacy. In response to this, we reviewed and revised the curricula of two of Murdoch University's key enabling programs to incorporate material which focused on developing these skills. This paper presents our rationale and examples of our diverse approaches to addressing social and emotional learning in curricula which aims to support and enable the transition of educationally disadvantaged students into undergraduate studies.

Background and context

The burden of mental health issues on university students and their ability to successfully access, transition and participate in university has been recurrent in contemporary educational discourse (Cleary, Walter, & Jackson, 2011; Said, Kypri, & Bowman, 2013). This is especially true in the changing higher education space as the 'widening participation' agenda plays out in the wake of the Review of Higher Education in 2008 (Bradley et al., 2008). Walter (2015) noted that "one in four young people between the ages of 15 and 25 will develop a mental health disorder" (para. 1), many of whom are currently enrolled at university; and "86% of university students severely affected by mental illness will drop out, adding to their sense of worthlessness and failure" (para. 6). Thus, the mental wellbeing of university students is of paramount concern, both for the student, and for the institution.

Retention is a primary goal for universities, yet personal circumstances leading to attrition are often seen as beyond the control of the institution (Bedford, 2009; Hodges et al., 2013; Whannell, Whannell, & Bedford, 2013). Retention strategies for students presenting with mental health or emotional issues affecting study are often limited to providing a counselling service (frequently unable to offer long-term, ongoing support) and equity support. However, many students are either unaware of, or reluctant to access such services in the first instance (Hodges et al., 2013). Instead, problems are often raised with their tutors and lecturers who generally have little/no mental health training and are unable to support the student except with reactive approaches, such as suggesting assignment extensions and referral to services.

Mental health issues are of particular concern in pre-university enabling programs which often specifically target equity groups, such as those with medical conditions (including mental health issues), disability, low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) backgrounds and students on Humanitarian visas. This is supported by research into one of Murdoch University's key enabling programs, *OnTrack*, where 'medical and/or emotional issues' was the most common reason for student withdrawal (Lisciandro & Gibbs, In-press). Research into other Australian enabling programs, sometimes referred to as "bridging courses, university preparation courses, foundation courses and pathway courses" suggests that this is a common phenomenon (Hodges et al., 2013, p. 14). The National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) recently established a special interest group called *Mental Health* in recognition of the need for further research and action in this important area of concern (Crawford, 2015). Walter (2015) suggests that "it is imperative that we support tertiary students in ways that promote not only their learning but their emotional and mental resilience" (para. 13), and "social and emotional learning should be explicitly taught alongside academic skills, with a focus on self-care, coping and resilience" (para. 15). Academic educators are becoming increasingly aware that strategies to support university students with mental health issues needs to be revisited, both within enabling programs and in university courses. Taking heed of Walter's suggestions, we recognise that this is possible by embedding social and emotional learning within the enabling curriculum, alongside traditional 'academic' skills.

What is social and emotional learning?

Social and emotional learning are not new buzz terms. The connection and impact of emotions on learning (from kindergarten to adult) has been of interest to researchers for decades. Of particular note is Carol Dweck who, throughout the 2000s, has championed the project of supporting the emotional, as well as the academic mind of the learner.

Mindsets about learning

The concept of 'learning mindsets' originates from self-theories research in the field of psychology, and was pioneered by Dweck and colleagues (Dweck, 2010, 2012). It recognises the beliefs and attitudes associated with learning that might be held by an individual (Mercer & Ryan, 2010, p. 437):

> Mindsets represent some of the basic assumptions individuals make about various human attributes, such as intelligence or personality. Some people may regard such attributes as being static or fixed and there is nothing that can be done to change these fundamental traits (fixed mindset), while others may regard these traits as being more malleable and that humans always have the capacity to change them (growth mindset).

Dweck suggests that people with fixed learner mindsets believe that intelligence is an inborn trait and therefore exerting effort in learning reflects not having ability, whereas people with growth mindsets believe that intelligence needs to be developed and therefore view effort as a necessary part of the learning process. Individuals with fixed mindsets tend to engage in behaviour that is self-limiting for their learning; for example, they tend to disregard constructive feedback and elicit avoidance or helpless behaviours in the face of challenges, setbacks or mistakes. Individuals with growth mindsets instead take on challenges and use feedback constructively (Dweck, 2010, 2012). Electrical brain scans show that "growth-minded individuals allocated more attention to corrective information following error feedback and were more likely to correct their mistakes on a surprise retest" (Moser et al., 2011, p. 1).

The beliefs that students hold about their academic capabilities (academic self-efficacy) is strongly linked to academic achievement (Zimmerman, 2000). Dweck's research has demonstrated that cultivating a growth mindset boosts motivation, resilience, self-efficacy and self-esteem, and ultimately leads to higher academic achievement (Dweck, 2010).

Mindfulness and emotional intelligence

Mindfulness is defined as "a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context" (Langer, 2000, p. 220). The practice has its core in Buddhist mediation, but in recent years also recognised in medicine and psychology as beneficial to psychological and physical wellbeing. In line with this is mounting evidence that mindfulness mediation can elicit significant emotional, cognitive and neurophysiological changes that lead to, for example, reduced stress and anxiety, enhancing focused attention and information processing (Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011; Moore & Malinowski, 2009; Zeidan et al., 2010). The benefits of mindfulness-based meditation for learners are also increasingly recognised. Langer (1997, p. 111) posited that:

> When we are mindful, we implicitly or explicitly (1) view a situation from several perspectives, (2) see information presented in the situation as novel, (3) attend to the context in which we perceive the information, and eventually, (4) create new categories through which this information may be understood.

Thus, mindfulness may be "integrally connected with the centrally transformative and developmental nature of learning and educational activity at all levels" (Hyland, 2010, p. 517). Recently, Shapiro, Brown, and Astin (2011, pp. 2-3) have advocated the embedding of mindfulness in higher education, arguing that it "facilitates the achievement of traditional educational goals", "helps support student mental health under academic stress", and assists "development of the whole person" including interpersonal capacities, creativity, empathy and self-compassion. Notably, mindfulness practices may also support the development of emotional intelligence (Shapiro et al., 2011).

The term emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to identify, understand, use and regulate emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Notably, there is growing evidence that EI is strongly linked with retention and academic achievement of students, including those transitioning into tertiary educational settings (Parker et al., 2004).

Rationale for embedding social and emotional learning in the 'enabling' curriculum

Along with the changing landscape of universities under the 'widening participation' agenda (Bradley et al., 2008), increasing evidence has highlighted the significant burden of mental health issues amongst students engaging with higher education. In a recent study, 30% of students enrolled at an Australian university reported depression, anxiety, eating disorders and/or harmful drinking (Said et al., 2013). In another Australian study, 84% of university students were found to be experiencing high levels of psychological distress (Stallman, 2010). In these studies, students most at risk included females, those aged 18-34 years old, those with a disability and those on low incomes. Notably, these 'at-risk' groups are typically over-represented in enabling program cohorts compared with the general university student population (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011). For example, of all students that enrolled in the *OnTrack* enabling program at Murdoch University between 2008 and 2014 (n = 2115), 59% were female, 19% declared a disability or medical condition and 31% were from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Lisciandro & Gibbs, In-press).

This is compounded by the fact that enabling students have often experienced educational disadvantage or disruption previously and may find it more difficult to adapt to university life and learning. Indeed, student attrition from enabling programs (although variable) is typically in the order of 50%, substantially higher than that described for undergraduate students (Hodges et al., 2013). Further, once enabling-pathway students reach university, there is evidence that although they are retained at a level that is commensurate with their peers, they tend to have lower academic achievement (Chesters & Watson, 2014). Contemporary research on this topic advocates for "addressing academic gaps with psychological interventions" (Yeager, Walton, & Cohen, 2013, p. 62). In particular, it has been recognised that learners need to develop effective habits for learning that allow them to sustain motivation and emotional resilience, improve academic self-efficacy, and employ learning strategies that help to improve their chances of success in the face of new challenges.

Yet, the social and emotional learning needs and wellbeing of students transitioning to university is often not considered at all in the tertiary education curriculum. Most of the work in this area has so far been confined to courses with long histories of high rates of student psychological distress, like law and medicine (Field, 2014; Larcombe, Baik, & Brooker, 2015). Approaches to addressing this in the first year law curriculum have included the use of reflective practice (Field & Duffy, 2012) and intentional assessment and feedback design practices as part of an overall *transition pedagogy* (Field & Kift, 2010). Stallman (2011) also explored the usefulness of a resilience intervention in the tertiary curriculum, with positive outcomes. Notably, the Office of Learning and Teaching recently funded a project aimed at developing "comprehensive guidance to assist academic teachers to embed into practice pedagogical principles and approaches that support the psychological needs of university students" in recognition of the need for more widespread action (Larcombe et al., 2015, p. 1).

As enabling educators, we have become increasingly concerned about the academic and mental welfare of students engaging with the enabling programs that we coordinate. In response to this, we have set out to review and revise the curricula of the two key enabling programs (*OnTrack* and *K-Track*) offered at Murdoch University to address the social and emotional learning needs of our students. Below we outline examples of our diverse approaches and how these have evolved under differing constraints, such as differences in delivery and student cohort sizes.

Approaches to embedding social and emotional learning in enabling education

Example from OnTrack program: embedding Dweck's notion of learner mindsets

OnTrack is an enabling program that started in 2008 and has so far provided more than 3000 students with the opportunity to access university, many of whom previously experienced educational disruption or disadvantage. It is offered twice a year on all of Murdoch University's domestic campuses, including one metropolitan and two regional campuses as an internal, full-time 14-week study option only. Enrolments have grown progressively every year, with a total expected enrolment in excess of 500 students in Semester 1, 2016.

Because of growing concerns for mental health needs of the students, in 2015 the unit coordinators set out to incorporate material which focused on developing student awareness and understanding of the psychological aspects of learning, including: (1) the role of EI in success at university, (2) research supporting the practice of mindfulness for success at university and (3) theories about learner mindsets and research showing impacts of growth

versus fixed mindsets on learner achievement, motivation and resilience. In particular, the unit coordinators felt that Dweck's work on mindsets was especially relevant to the cohort, as there is increasing evidence to suggest that teaching mindsets and delivering growth-minded messages positively influences learner performance and academic achievement (Cutts et al., 2010). Thus, it was decided that we would start by including one lecture covering this topic to be delivered a week before the exam. The lecture was framed as a skills lecture which offered tips on thinking about thinking and moving from a fixed to a growth mindset, as well as how meditation (according to neuroscientists) can change the brain and help students to become 'mindful' learners, which can help to focus their studies. It was delivered as content that could be added to their skills 'toolkit' to help combat nerves, and build academic self-efficacy as they went into the exam period and then into their degree program. The lecture was well received by both students and tutors, with the feedback that they wished it was earlier in the semester.

In the second pilot, we integrated a more comprehensive series of learner resources and activities aimed to assist students to: (a) develop an awareness of their own learning mindset, (b) understand how mindset can impact learning, motivation and academic achievement, and (c) identify and employ strategies which cultivate a growth mindset and empower more effective learning. To achieve these learning outcomes, we developed two lectures and a number of new tutorial activities. The first lecture was strategically delivered early in the semester and built on existing related curriculum content covering Gardner's views of intelligence (Gardner, 1993) and the neuroscience supporting the idea that intelligence can be developed. The aim was to introduce this material early so that students could build a self-awareness of their own mindset and practise strategies that cultivate a growth mindset throughout the semester. The second lecture, delivered later in the semester, revisited growth mindset content and introduced other psychological habits of successful learners, such as practising EI and mindfulness. These lectures were supported by a series of related tutorials where they, for example, collaboratively constructed their understanding of the mindset concept, completed a learning mindset quiz and engaged in critical self-reflection.

As well as this, the idea of learner mindsets was regularly revisited throughout the semester. For example, students were encouraged to reflect on progress towards learning goals frequently throughout the program and were required to submit these reflections as part of their assessment tasks. Further, to model and reinforce the idea of growth mindsets, Dweck advocated that student feedback must be focused on the process rather than outcome; and that one cannot simply 'teach' the concept – tutors and lecturers need to embody the mindset themselves to teach it effectively (Dweck, 2007). To address this, assignment marking rubrics were instilled with 'growth-minded' language emphasizing the value of progress made in learning rather than celebrating achievement. As well as this, new sections titled 'Celebrate' and 'Mission', an adaptation of the Black and Wiliam (1998) 'Medals and Missions' were added to the marking rubrics to help students recognize progress areas and identify further learning goals for future focus. Further, professional development opportunities were offered to tutors because of their key role in modeling the desired attitudes and behaviours; encouraging them to reflect on their language use in the classroom and in assessment feedback. Notably, in 2015 unit evaluations, OnTrack achieved significantly higher student ratings on 'feedback on marked work' (mean=5.36, n=65) than the university-wide average (mean=4.69, n=9162). One tutor also commented on how he was able to work mindset content authentically and informally into tutorial discussions as the opportunity arose (P. Le Breton, personal communications):

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When my students or I say things that strongly reflect a particular mindset, we often draw attention to that. For example, if a student says 'I hate critical analysis and I'm not good at it,' I might ask them if they would reconsider what they said, bearing in mind what they know about mindsets.

Notably, our approach to teaching the idea of mindsets aims to be transformative (Mezirow, 1991) and constructivist in nature (Petty, 2006). Learning activities and related assessment tasks require students to construct their understanding of Dweck's concept of mindsets collaboratively and then to make sense of the material in the context of their own experience (reflect). Taylor (1998, pp. 52-53) advocated that "fostering transformative learning involves creating experiences that can help facilitate understanding among participants" and that change in understanding is "a developmental process occurring over time." Therefore, the sequence of learning activities was structured so as to allow plenty of time and space for students to reflect and develop awareness of their attitudes and behaviours around learning as well as reactions to assessment feedback, and to attempt to set in place some good habits as informed through the material delivered early in the semester.

Feedback from students and staff indicates that both were highly engaged with the idea of mindsets and it has, in many cases, transformed students' beliefs and confidence related to learning, with positive flow-on effects for student outcomes. One tutor commented: "students were very engaged by the notion of mindsets and found – as I have found - the idea has profound meaning for their learning and lives" (P. Le Breton, personal communication). Further, a student commented: "The emphasis on work not intelligence, and reassurance of being able to learn were some of the highlights for me" (Respondent 33, S2 2015 Unit Survey). As evidence of impact is currently anecdotal we are now working towards conducting a formal evaluation in 2016 that will also inform further curricula development.

Example from K-Track program: embedding mindfulness and emotional intelligence

K-track is an enabling program for Indigenous students provided by the Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre at Murdoch University. *K-Track* was developed in 2011 and offered for the first time in 2012 as an internal, full-time, three unit program run over 14 weeks. In 2015 it was expanded to four units, and it has also been offered externally since 2014. *K-Track* enrolments have been capped at 20 students per iteration. To date, 61 students have passed the program and were offered a place in an undergraduate course at Murdoch University.

K-Track was developed based on principles of transformative learning and as such has intentionally embedded activities and materials designed to challenge (and hopefully transform) student schemas, especially perceptions of identity and self, in each one of the four units. More specifically, each one of the K-Track units aims to invite students into the liminal space described by Mezirow (1991) and to engage with the tensions that exist in the paradox of socio-cultural-personal dichotomies. However, negotiating the liminal space can be confronting and painful for students (Mälkki, 2011), especially when notions of personhood and self are challenged. Mindfulness is one technique that was incorporated into the program as a support system to students.

Since its first offering in 2012, *K-Track* has had lectures on learning and personality styles and how this affects student learning. For the first two years, materials relating to self-knowledge and awareness were presented during lectures and discussed in tutorials. However, unit developers felt that knowledge alone did not necessarily lead to changed

attitudes in the majority of students. Consequently, more practical activities were incorporated into the curriculum in 2014.

A one hour lecture on brain plasticity, presented by a clinical psychologist, was added into one of the units. The lecture is immediately followed by a two hour motivational session, where students, under the guidance of the psychologist, challenge some of their disempowering thoughts, feelings and emotions. This first session is conducted early in the semester (week 3). The psychologist then returned four weeks before the end of the semester to discuss the fears of success that may be arising in some students and how this fear may act as a saboteur, preventing them from finishing and perpetuating long held beliefs about themselves. This lecture is again followed by another 2 hour motivational session. The notion that one can actively re-wire one's brain is very attractive to students because it gives them hope that change is possible. These sessions are now a permanent feature in the programme.

In addition, we decided to expand on students' ability to recognise and name their emotions (Olivo, 2014). The science unit within *K-Track* is stressful for students because it activates many of their fears and phobias (especially to maths). In this unit the tutor intentionally encourages students to name and sit with their emotions as they arise and to link them to the knowledge (personality and learning types, their inner saboteurs, etc). When emotions are identified (mostly anxiety, frustration, low self-esteem) students are taught strategies that might be helpful in alleviating them, e.g. tapping (Craig, 2011) or breathing (Brown, Gerbarg, & Muench, 2013).

In 2015, we added practice to the theory, specifically exercise and mindfulness as these have been shown to improve mental health (Marchand, 2012) and learning outcomes (Hillman, Erickson, & Kramer, 2008). To do this, we added a fourth unit to the programme, iHealth, where two of the four contact hours are dedicated to theory and the remaining two hours to practice. One hour is dedicated to supervised exercise (30 mins in the gym, 30 mins outdoors playing sports games). The second hour is dedicated to mindfulness. The assessment for this unit is based on weekly (10) self-reflections/personal narratives to develop the reflective practice required to fully integrate mindfulness practice and the development of emotional and spiritual resilience and maturity (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). These reflections are submitted as a blog that is only visible to the tutor. Only if the content reveals that the student is experiencing emotional distress will the tutor comment. Blog entries may be in any format (prose, poetry, art, music, videos, etc). The grade for this blog is based on the number of blog entries rather than the content.

In semester 1, 2015, students practiced mindful listening, chanting, touching, walking, yoga and Tai Chi. We had emphasised movement and sound as many people find meditating difficult. However, we found that students who were active drug users at that time struggled with these activities. Interestingly, the same students now credit mindfulness and self-reflection as one of the tools that helped them break their addiction (unsolicited student feedback). In semester 2, 2015 a team of counsellors and psychologists guided the mindfulness practices. We added mindful eating, observing, colouring in, breathing, body scanning and meditating. For example, some students bought themselves colouring-in books, while one student bought a mobile phone meditation application.

Student feedback provided to staff and in unit evaluations has been very positive; and past K-Trackers self-reported that they continued applying and using some of the practical techniques that they had been taught (K. Strehlow, unpublished observations). Further,

incorporating mindfulness practices into the curriculum has also affected retention rates. A retention and transition rate of 60%, twice that of the national average (Wilks & Wilson, 2014) was obtained in Semester 1, 2015. We plan to add stretches and chair yoga, and a 5-minute mindfulness practice at the beginning of each day in 2016, to expand our programme.

Considerations for embedding social and emotional learning in enabling curricula

Both the *OnTrack* and *K-Track* programs aimed to embed social and emotional learning within their curricula, however there were constraints and limitations at unit/program and institutional levels that impacted on the approach taken. Firstly, student cohort size was an important consideration; the larger cohorts of *OnTrack* meant that financially and logistically *OnTrack* could not include yoga, supervised exercise classes or group sessions guided by trained counsellors. Notably, *K-Track* intentionally limits student intake to ensure that the program can continue in its current form. Secondly, the delivery mode also impacted the approach taken: *OnTrack* is currently delivered on-campus, and if taken online then thought would have to be given to how tutorial activities, which require the emotional care of the tutor, would be delivered to ensure students were in a safe space (i.e. a space that encourages exploration yet safely contains arising emotions). *K-Track* is offered online, and many of the activities have been modified with this objective in mind. Students are provided with a list of mindfulness applications, such as SmilingMind which have been tested in various contexts. We have found that student self-reflections through the weekly blogs provided us with an early indicator of whether students required additional (academic, pastoral, counselling) help. Thirdly, offering mindfulness-based practices raises the challenge of up-skilling or developing teaching staff in being 'mindful' practitioners (Crane et al., 2010). While our staff were open to the idea, they were sometimes reluctant to become practitioners, which is essential for delivery and success of mindfulness-based programs (Kabat-Zinn et al., 2011).

Future research and opportunities

The emotional and academic wellbeing of students transitioning to university study is of increasing concern to enabling and other tertiary educators. Addressing social and emotional learning in the curriculum and in pedagogical practices may be one important way to enhance the motivation, resilience and academic self-efficacy of students that have previously experienced educational disadvantage, and potentially boost their academic achievement and retention outcomes. However, the implementation of such initiatives requires careful thought and planning, with the needs and nature of the cohort considered in this process. Here, we have outlined some examples of our diverse approaches to the inclusion of such material under differing program constraints. Anecdotally it appears that these initiatives have had a profound impact on both the student and staff experience in these programs. In future, we intend to formally evaluate and report on the outcomes of these initiatives, particularly the longer term outcomes as students move forward into their undergraduate studies.

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