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Building Resilience in Adult Online Students

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Abstract

Student resilience has been shown to increase persistence in online academic programs. Resilience is a skill that can be developed (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). One method, the broaden-and-build theory, focuses on building positive thought repertoires in students to help them combat negative thought repertoires that can lead to downward spirals of negative emotions (Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007). Thought repertoires are the connections our brain makes between events, actions, and emotions (Garland, Frederickson, Kring, Johnson, Meyer, & Penn, 2010). Creating more positive emotional connections between the student and the program in the online classroom can build positive thought repertoires, which can be used during times of adversity to combat stress (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

Overview

Resilience is the ability to adjust to adversity using positivity and a flexible set of attitudes (Jackson et al., 2007; Klibert, Lamis, Collins, Smalley, Warren, Yancey, & Winterowd, 2014). Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) in a study of college students found that having a positive mindset allowed for positive emotions that in turn aided students in recovering from adverse events. Putting a positive spin on negative events is an important skill that helps students become more resilient. Another study suggests that resilience can be created when faculty build relationships with students especially when they give the students opportunities to become more reflective during their program (Jackson et al., 2007).

Much of the current research into the student experience in higher education does not consider the importance of resilience, motivation, and the student's life experiences in helping students avoid stress (Brewer, 2010). Moreover, a more recent study by Klibert et al. (2014) indicated student depression and anxiety are often linked to socially prescribed perfectionism, which was shown in their study to be mediated by resilience. Finding ways to increase resilience in students, especially in an online environment, can help students combat the increased anxiety often associated with online learning. This chapter explores the literature on resiliency to identify best practices that can be specifically implemented in an online environment to help develop student resilience and maintain high rates of student persistence.

Review of the Literature

Resilience is a relatively new concept in the research related to student learning and the concept of adaptability under stress (Hartley, 2011). Resilience in this context is defined as the ability to handle adversity and adjust to it in a positive manner (Jackson et al., 2007). Adversity in distance learning can result from issues with technology, the lack of direct interaction with the faculty, and feelings of loneliness (Park & Choi, 2009). Adversity can also lead to stress, which is known to affect academic performance and, ultimately, persistence (Hartley, 2011). Additionally, students who experience disconnection from a program are more likely to

experience stress and anxiety (Hartley, 2011). Klibert et al. (2014) have also shown that stress can be a result of perfectionism known to be partially mediated by increased resilience. Increasing the feeling of connectedness, and increasing students' resiliency in the process, benefits students by decreasing stress and promoting persistence, which will help them achieve their personal educational goals (Hart, 2012).

Increasing resiliency has been studied for some time in the psychological community. Fredrickson (1998, 2001) developed the leading theory on building resiliency over seventeen years ago. The broaden-and-build theory was created after research showed a strong connection between positive emotions and resiliency. Fredrickson (1998, 2001) posited that positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires, helping people to be more resilient by building personal resources. Thought-action repertoires are the scripts that lead thoughts to become emotions or actions: "joy sparks the urge to play, interest sparks the urge to explore, contentment sparks the urge to savor and integrate" (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 1). Negative emotions can also trigger responses; however, those responses are more often narrow such as attacking or fleeing (Fredrickson, 2004).

The broaden-and-build theory predicts that focusing on positive emotions builds psychological resilience by broadening thinking and building more thought repertoires that help people cope (Fredrickson, 2004). Broadening resilience has also been shown to increase the ability of students to pay attention to the subject they are learning by limiting distracting emotions (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Resilience then is seen as a key for helping students control their emotions.

Garland et al. (2010) asserted that emotions are systems that maintain a set organization. For example, fear of failing becomes connected to anger, and then when a grade is not what was expected, that anger can lead to an outburst. Students can feel bad about what they have done and then they can spiral downward into self-hatred and other negative thoughts or behaviors, reinforcing the negative experience. By broadening someone's positive scripts and creating more upward positive spirals, the student is better able to recover from negative events and therefore becomes more resilient. Pulling from the existing literature on the broaden-and-build theory, the next section will apply broadening principles to online classroom experiences that can help build resilience in students.

Broadening Student Resilience

Many psychological studies have shown that resilience can be built and influenced by others (Abbott, Klein, Hamilton, & Rosenthal, 2009; Fava & Tomba, 2009; Fredrickson 1998, 2001, 2004; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Garland et al., 2010; Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006; Stallman, 2011; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson, 2013). Broadening students' resilience by building up positive thought repertoires can help students recover from stressful and adverse life events, getting them back on track faster (Fredrickson 1998, 2001). In the online academic setting, there are limited opportunities for face-to-face connections with students. Therefore, it is important to be mindful of opportunities where negative thoughts can lead to downward spirals (e.g., low grades on papers, large assignments due, past due work, sickness, negative life events, and boundaries, such as final exams and projects or the end of the quarter). These opportunities present a chance to build positive thought repertoires by changing the dialogue from a negative story to a positive one.

It is possible to build positive thought repertoires by creating new stories around studying, reading, completing assignments, discussion boards, and faculty feedback on assignments. For instance, associating a sense of accomplishment or prestige to reading an entire book in one week creates pride that can lead to a greater sense of self-worth. If this happens enough times, it becomes part of the student's thought repertoire associated with required readings. This positive association will combat the negative thoughts and stresses students feel when looking at their reading requirements, making them more resilient and better able to handle future classes. The student will brag about being able to read a whole book in one week instead of complaining about the workload.

Creating positive associations requires online faculty to do more than just grade students' work. Faculty must make connections with their students. One method for creating a sense of connection is the use of class videos. Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) found that students who viewed a funny or happy film before a negative film recovered faster from the adverse event. The use of video (film) allows for a more personal connection with students. Including instructional or general feedback videos where in the faculty member gets personal, is smiling, and showing concern can build resilience, especially in situations where the students may be

receiving criticism such as in a grading situation. Adding humorous videos or comics along with the lesson can also set a positive mood in the online space. Making a connection with the student builds the relationship; the more positive the student relationship with the professor, the more resilience can be generated.

In addition to creating videos for the classroom at large, faculty can create personal grade feedback for students, particularly when they have many issues to address in a paper. Recording grade feedback either with video or with audio-only files has been shown to create a greater connection between the student and the faculty member, allowing for more complex ideas to be exchanged (Marriott & Teoh, 2012; Wolff-Hilliard & Baethe, 2014). In a study of over one hundred students, Marriot and Teoh (2012) found that students who received video and audio feedback for writing assignments felt that the feedback was more personal than written feedback. They also overwhelmingly felt that the feedback was clear and easy to understand. The connection that audio or visual feedback gives the student during what is typically a negative experience can create a more positive response in students (Marriott & Teoh, 2012). Critically thinking about ways in which you can build students up and change the script from a negative interaction to a positive interaction begins to change the scripts in students' minds, therefore broadening their thought repertoires and increasing resiliency.

Another method to increase positivity in the classroom is through reflective or stress-relieving fun assignments. Creating an assignment designed to make the learning more fun using multimedia, alternative assignment formats, or time to play with the learning allows students to begin associating learning with play, which can elicit joy and happiness (Garland et al., 2010). The sense of play can create new thought repertoires when connected to the online environment. Using the same week for this playful exercise in every class gives students something to look forward to in each class. Over time these moments build a student's resilience by creating happy thought repertoires. For variety, a sense of surprise can be added by hiding the assignment until the week before, which gives the students something to look forward to. Fava and Tomba (2009) asserted that the distance from a goal can often increase a student's negative thoughts and stress. Therefore, another method to build resilience in students is to create short-term goals that allow them to accomplish non-graded tasks that can be acknowledged. For example, the first student to

finish all the readings and post on the discussion board wins the Reader of the Week Award. Rewarding students along the path and moving the focus beyond grades also helps to rewrite thought repertoires around what the classroom is about. Face-to-face classes offer many opportunities for connections and special moments. Online classes must specifically create those opportunities by planning them into the curriculum process. The tips listed above are only the beginning. There are still many ways to connect and build student resilience to be explored.

Recommendations

Pulling from the chapter discussion, there are ways in which online faculty can currently begin to build resiliency in their students. By following the recommendations listed below, faculty can begin to create moments of positivity in the classroom. These moments can start to broaden students' thought repertoires and expand their capacity for resilience. Based on the current literature in online learning and resilience, the following is a list of specific recommendations for online programs:

- Create moments of fun in the classroom.
 - Have students create a meme from the weekly readings.
 - Allow students to watch a funny video that connects to what is being learned.
- Use videos and audio files to connect with students.
 - Record a weekly lecture.
 - Offer tips on upcoming assignments or feedback for the class on prior assignments.
- Use video or audio files to give students feedback on assignments. Record audio or video while grading the paper, discussing both strengths and weaknesses.
 - Be sure to smile and use language to build up student confidence when giving feedback.
 - Be aware of the stress points in class and prepare to build student confidence; upon completion of that phase of the class, be prepared to cheer the students' accomplishments.
- Use goal setting within the class to give students smaller points to work toward and achieve projects that aren't grade related.

- Note when the weekly readings are particularly long or detailed.
- Set goals for readings and assignments as markers toward completion.
- Use discussion boards as markers toward a larger assignment. Let students build up to that assignment so they feel they are making progress.
- Plan for holidays or events that may distract students outside of the class; look for opportunities to connect classroom assignments to those events.

Conclusion

The process of creating resilience in online students revolves around the ability to broaden their thought repertoires by including more positive repertoires for them to use in times of crisis. Creating these repertoires requires careful planning when designing an online class. The goal is to build opportunities for positive interactions between the student and the faculty member. Online learning can no longer be restricted to reading and writing. To build up student resistance and therefore persistence in the program, faculty must discover innovative ways to reach out to students and build positive thoughts and experiences. Building these positive thought repertoires requires faculty to make positive connections with students. Taking time to set short-term goals, reward challenging requirements with accolades, use video and audio resources from the Internet, and create self-recorded videos helps to deepen the bonds with the student. The recommendations listed here are just a start. More research needs to be done into the application of the broaden-and-build theory to the online classroom.

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Author Biography

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