

Plan for a SoTL Project

by Julie White, St. Lawrence College

Research Question

I teach international post-graduate students (most who are trained in health-related professions). When students come to our program, most are experiencing a totally different culture, English that may not “sound” like they have heard before, and educational expectations that are almost completely opposite to what they have experienced.

The importance of building a relationship and promoting authentic engagement is vital for many of these students. Most of these students come from collectivist societies while our educational system is individual-focused. We need to find ways to leverage collectivist culture so students can be successful individually.

Borrowing from Zaretta Hammond’s Brain-targeted Teaching Model, Jack Kornfield’s Wisdom Traditions and Dr. Dan Siegal’s Mindsight, I want to explore whether using practices based on interpersonal neurobiology to create a more contemplative (mindful) classroom can promote authentic engagement and belonging among international students in Health Care Administration (HCA).

Identify challenge/outcome related to learning that is related to your question.

Outcomes that I would want to measure through surveying students before and after the start/finish of the 7-week COMM5000 Communications for Health Professionals course include:

- Change in how students assess their feeling of belonging in the course/program/school
- Change in feeling of vulnerability of students in class
- Change in percentage of students who have a growth mindset

I will need to consult the Research Ethics office at St. Lawrence College to discuss whether a REB proposal is needed in order to carry out this work. The very nature of this practice does open students to vulnerability – and answering questions related to that may contribute to that vulnerability as well. My intention would be to collect data through two anonymous surveys – one conducted at the start of the first class and the other at the end of the course.

Describe the instructional activity, assignment, or teaching strategy that will promote student learning on the outcome you identified.

The Learning Plan for COMM5000 is focused on creating awareness of emotional intelligence, as well as developing many of the skills people working in health care in Canada require. What this approach will do is build in more mindfulness practices to attempt to reduce cultural barriers (by bringing all participants in the course together as humans), while being respectful and inclusive of cultural diversity.

This will be done through the use of mindful exercises – starting every class with breathing exercises to centre and ground our group.

Many HCA students have worked as health professionals in their home countries (as doctors, dentists, pharmacists, nurses, physiotherapists, etc.) but once they arrive in Canada they learn it is a very long, difficult and expensive road if they want to practice within their profession here. This can have a devastating effect on learners – especially if it is coupled with an entirely new way of learning. Many students face significant feelings of failure and many do not feel safe to reach out for support. That is where working with students to create a different mindset can come in, to improve student self-efficacy.

Creating an academic mindset: Students need to feel they belong in the academic community, that they can be successful, their ability and competence will grow with their effort and that there is value in the work they are doing.

In addition to mindful breathing and other exercises, I will provide students with detailed feedback on their progress through recorded responses to assignments, as well as through email and virtual one-on-one meetings as needed.

I will undertake an activity that will involve each student reflecting on and writing about the assignment that they are most proud of from their educational experiences. I will be clear that this is not an activity to focus on a grade, but to really look deep into their learning process. I will ask them to explain what it was in the learning experience that made it successful and what made that work different from other experiences (15 minutes). Then I will put the students in groups of 3 (randomly selected) so they can share their Learning Highlight. The first person will share, 5 minutes – then the rest of the group can ask clarifying questions (3 minutes). The group then offers insight into why this practice was successful and what made it different (5 minutes). They congratulate the presenter for

sharing and the next member shares, repeating the process. This will help students connect with their expertise and competencies.

Creating a culturally responsive community for learning: Contemplative neuroscience suggests there is significant power in rituals within a classroom. We will establish a period after a break in our three-hour classes for a *cultural show and tell* – where a student shares a poem, piece of artwork, song, dance, etc. from their homeland and describes why it resonates with them.

Blog post assignments will feature flexibility in terms of allowing students want to create and reflect their work – they can choose from written, oral, visual, formats (rubrics will reflect each approach).

While this approach differs from our traditional approaches at the college, it may provide students with strong visual and/or oral connections the opportunity to learn the material required, but to demonstrate their learning in a more traditional or comfortable way.

Use communication examples from countries where students are from (eg. Visual communications in India, Electronic communications in China, Written communications in Philippines, Oral communications in Kazakhstan and Non-Verbal communication in Brazil).

Audio/video comment/feedback on assignments (in acknowledgement of oral culture)

Describe the evidence that would persuade an external audience that the new or modified teaching strategy improves student learning on the targeted learning outcome.

I think student stories will be helpful in sharing the success/failure of this approach.

In terms of data, the change in how students assess their sense of belonging in the course/program and school would help show whether these measures are effective.

Measuring the sense of vulnerability and the levels of vulnerability students can have with faculty and other students is also important and will demonstrate whether we have been successful in creating a more inclusive, compassionate environment.

Finally, measuring the shift in mindset – to a growth mindset will also help determine if these efforts are effective.

With short-term success, it may be effective to follow these students throughout their education to see if the mindset lessons delivered in COMM5000 transfer into their approach in other classes.

If How and where would you publish, present, or disseminate this work?

One group which needs to hear the research findings (and first) will be the students who have been participants in this class. As these students have participated in a different approach to learning (one that likely took them outside of the comfort levels at first), it is important the we discuss what the findings indicated. I think this is especially important for people who are planning to enter into healthcare fields, as mindset is often an important step towards compassion.

I would like to present my findings to my colleagues in the Health Care Administration program, representatives from the School of Business and International Office representatives at SLC. We have a conference called Learning Connections for our college where I would ask a few of the student participants to present alongside me. I would also want to present this information to our Program Advisory Committee. From there, I'd take direction from my Association Dean and/or SCTL colleagues as to how we should reach out and share lessons learned.

Adapted from: C. J. Stanny, E. M. El-Sheikh, & H-M. Chung (2009) ***Getting Started with a SoTL Project***

Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment <http://uwf.edu/cutla/>