

COVID-19 Mental Health Working Group concept paper series

Topic – Enhancing student learning and wellbeing during COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all. However, the effects on mental health have not been universal. Therefore, the road to recovery after COVID-19 is complex. This series of papers engages experts across multiple disciplines, addressing digital engagement and the need for information, and the unique mental health recovery challenges experienced by students, carers, older adults as well as stigmatised or marginalized communities. Each of the papers in this series is structured as follows: What we know, what we don't know and what we can do to map a nuanced path to effective creative recovery.

What we know

While online learning has been a part of tertiary education for some time, it has never been experienced at such scale or implemented with such speed as during the COVID-19 pandemic. As educators, learners and parents all grapple with the challenges of remote learning, the important question of how to support students to sustain motivation and promote their overall wellbeing is front of mind. Experts have speculated that [individual differences in circumstances and personality are important to consider](#), however, [past research](#) also suggests there are some universal principles of learning that can help promote flourishing even in these extraordinary times.

Backed by [a large body of research](#), self-determination theory proposes that all humans share three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Self-determination theory [defines these needs](#) as psychological nutrients that are essential for human motivation and wellbeing. We describe these three needs below.

Autonomy involves feeling in control of one's own learning. It arises when we have choice. When satisfied, our need for autonomy leads to a sense of integrity and authenticity in the learning process. When frustrated, we feel pressured to study. **Competence** involves feelings of mastery. When our competence needs are satisfied, we feel a sense of effectiveness having realised that we are capable of achieving our learning goals. When frustrated, we experience self-doubt, indecisiveness and even helplessness. **Relatedness** involves feeling socially connected to as well as cared for by others. When satisfied, we feel a sense of belonging and that we are part of something that we also contribute to. When frustrated, we are likely to feel disconnected from the group, lonely or even alienated or excluded.

The extent to which an individual's learning experiences satisfy these three needs directly impacts their engagement in their learning and overall wellbeing. When the learning

experience meets these essential needs, it [facilitates motivation, promotes persistence and increases performance](#). As a result, students are also [more willing to be active \(even when the tasks are not inherently interesting\) and to value learning](#). When the environment fails to support these needs (or actively thwarts them), it undermines motivation and increases the risk of disengaging from learning.

What we don't know

Much of what we know about encouraging the satisfaction of basic psychological needs is based on [research with school aged children](#). Furthermore, whilst intuitively these principles of self-determination likely apply as much online as they do in person, very little experimental research has evaluated online learning experiences using this framework of self-determination. As we search for ways to help learners flourish in these unusual times, it can still be assumed that our basic needs as human beings remain the same. Students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness will continue to shape their learning, and offer ways to enhance engagement and wellbeing in the process. What we do not know is how online learning can be designed to maximise such autonomy, competence and relatedness. Moreover, we do not know as yet how to calibrate these motivational aspects for times of societal stress such as those brought about by the COVID19 pandemic, when students under stress due to uncertainty about their health, finances and prospects have to study, sometimes in isolation from their nurturing networks of family and friends.

What can we do?

Research has shown that there are ways we can design tasks and engage with learners in order to support their basic psychological needs. These strategies are needed in online learning contexts and can underpin new hybrid models that integrate the best of online learning when students return to learn at higher education campuses.

In order to promote **autonomy**, we can design authentic and meaningful tasks that maximise choice and encourage input from students. For example, at a basic level, students can be given a choice of assessment tasks. We can also encourage self-initiated behaviours whilst providing structured guidance and clear boundaries. For example, within the parameters of an activity students can be given opportunities to design personalised options. Even when tasks are not inherently interesting, an explanation of the task's connection to the learning outcomes promotes autonomy and results in a [greater effort to learn](#). It is important to reduce unnecessary emphasis on evaluation as the pressure of [assessment and the perception of coercion tend to frustrate autonomy](#).

Student **competence** can be supported by providing encouraging feedback and tools that help students to feel empowered to improve. Recent research has suggested the [use of emojis in feedback can positively influence students](#). Feedback should focus on individual development of mastery rather than comparative evaluation. For example, in low technology solutions, students can be invited to co-design assessment criteria and to self and peer assess their work.

Additionally, online tools can be used to monitor progress. Examples include [visual dashboards summarising real time analytics enabling students to track their own progress](#). Educators can also support competence by designing meaningful learning activities and assessments that are optimally challenging; the best tasks are those that allow students to test and expand their academic capabilities but that are not beyond their capabilities.

Educators can also increase **relatedness** by actively connecting with students and encouraging learners to connect with each other. [Students who feel that their teacher genuinely likes and respects them and cares about their learning are more motivated to learn](#). Similarly, parents can promote motivation by demonstrating a genuine concern for learning over grades. Designing learning activities that encourage real time interaction and respectful ways in which students can contribute to the collective learning will also promote the satisfaction of belonging. For example, creating a shared understanding of what the learning experience will be and goals/objectives, establishing protocols such as turning on video while speaking and using breakout groups when teaching online can facilitate connection. Easy activities such as checking in at the start of each class about our students' week as well as their individual perceptions of progress towards learning goals can emphasise the relational nature of learning.

This period of prolonged remote learning experienced around the world during COVID-19 has the potential to create fundamental shifts in the ways we think about tertiary education. It seems likely that online learning will feature more prominently in the future. In this context, the principles of autonomy, competence and relatedness provide a framework for learners, educators and parents to both reflect on and enhance learning now as well as in the hybrid models of the future.

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