

Supporting the wellbeing of associate lecturers at the Open University through a creative arts intervention

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Abstract

This case study discusses an online space created for associate lecturers (ALs) working at the Open University, with the intention of supporting wellbeing through sharing – and responding to – each other’s examples of creative arts activities. This paper reflects on engagement with and outcomes from this intervention. Four key themes emerged in participant responses to the intervention: 1) increased connectedness; 2) a feeling of being away from work; 3) happiness, enjoyment and positive feelings; and 4) openness to new places, ideas and shares. The results were analysed in line with available studies on sense of belonging, connectedness and well-being. This project highlights the potential for shared online creative activities to support connectedness and wellbeing in educators and students who are working in the online environment.

Key words: creative arts, higher education, wellbeing, online spaces, inclusive, connectedness

1. Introduction

1.1 Creative arts and their impact

Creative arts offer a medium of self-expression and have the potential to build participation, inclusion and connectedness in people and their communities and to contribute to wellbeing (Keyes, 2002). A review of research on the benefits of creative arts found substantial evidence of a link between creative arts and positive mental health. In many of the studies, creative arts – including photography, visual arts, crafts, writing and performing arts – were used as interventions (Leckey, 2011). When participants engage in creative arts projects, reported benefits can include relaxation, reduced blood pressure, reduced levels of stress and a boost to the immune systems (McNiff, 1992; Ulrich, 1992; Leckey, 2011). Additional reported benefits include increased self-esteem, confidence, enjoyment and motivation. According to

Ulrich (1992), creative arts can also be an effective way of celebrating individual differences and improving mutual understanding among their participants.

Though these studies show the benefits of interventions, there is a gap in research on the use of creative arts in the workplace and, in particular, in universities. According to Hacking *et al.* (2006), while healthcare settings and specialist art settings have been the contexts most researched for creative art projects and interventions, social services and education have been the least explored. However, they constitute an area where interventions are could be valuable, given that Higher Education (HE) can be a stressful environment for employees (Gearhart, Blavdes and McCarthy 2022; Iancu *et al.* 2017; Crute, 2007). A study by Kolmitro *et al.* (2020) highlights that factors such as stress, burnout and excessive workload for employees in HE can impact affect their wellbeing.

1.2 Wellbeing as a concept

The concept of wellbeing is increasingly seen as a priority in many organisations (Chen and Cooper, 2014). Historically, both eastern and western philosophies have debated this term, for cultural differences influence how it is understood and interpreted. One consensus in historical views of wellbeing is that it is more complex than the concept of 'happiness' (Fattore *et al.*, 2016). With changing social and global factors, the definition of wellbeing has evolved. Wellbeing overlaps with the concepts of health, welfare, and quality of life and, in its broadest sense, incorporates both physical and mental elements. Seligman (2011) identified five key dimensions of mental wellbeing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement.

The Department of Health defines wellbeing as “a positive state of mind and body, feeling safe and able to cope, with a sense of connection with people, communities and the wider environment” (Department of Health, 2011, p.90). The connection between communities, people and the environment stands out clearly in this definition. Similarly, the closely related concept of mental health is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022) as “... a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, and work well, and contribute to their community”.

1.3 Online spaces and wellbeing

Although digital engagement and interaction had become quite well established prior to COVID-19, it was this pandemic that forced an immediate shift online for many people and prompted consideration of the potential value of digital interpersonal spaces, where users would find it easier to connect and build relationships with peers, boost self-esteem and

capture new perspectives (Kostenius *et al.*, 2017; Toufaily *et al.*, 2018). However, it remains unclear whose responsibility it is to create online social spaces – the organisation, the individual or both?

Wellbeing at work has been described as having four dimensions: work satisfaction, organisational respect, employer care and work/life integration (Hyett and Parker, 2015). Providing safe spaces for interaction through creative arts is one illustration of the duty of care required of organisations for their employees. Many organisations identify wellbeing as a key factor in their success as well as an opportunity for learning (Trolan and Jach, 2021). However, there is little evidence so far of the use of creative expression to support wellbeing by building a sense of connectedness – most studies have focused on using creative media as an intervention for mental health issues.

2. Institutional context

At the Open University in the United Kingdom (UK), HE is delivered via distance-learning programmes. From the perspective of the associate lecturers (ALs) who are responsible for the delivery of these, one potential problem is that this experience can encourage a sense of isolation. During COVID, the emphasis on student wellbeing focused on quick adaptations on part of ALs to support students. Many ALs were juggling their work, dealing with conflicting commitments on modules and making quick adaptations to their teaching strategies. In my experience, the wellbeing of ALs quickly became a key issue: mulled over in cafés, during online coffee hours and within peer-led support groups.

The 'Access Programme' is a key element of the 'Access, Open and Cross-Curricular Innovation' (AOCCI) remit of the Open University. Due to the nature of the programme, there tends to be a greater need for support for students' study skills as well as for more guidance about academic content. Many Access students are lacking in confidence about their academic skills and may experience barriers to their learning, including – but not limited to – the greater likelihood of mental health issues. This situation can make the role of the Access AL particularly challenging. Access ALs offer wrap-around support to their learners, something often time-consuming and intensive; they also tend to teach across Access and other faculties. On account of various pressures, therefore, these ALs may well find it difficult to bond as a team or to prioritise their own self-care.

In response to this situation, and informed by the literature discussed above, an online space called 'Hues' was set up to encourage all ALs to engage in a non-academic, relaxing and creative expression, to build their sense of belonging and connectedness and, ultimately, to underpin their sense of wellbeing.

3. Project aims and design

The aims of this small-scale, exploratory project were to:

1. enhance wellbeing and reduce isolation of Access ALs by providing an opportunity for online creative expression.
2. evaluate the intervention to explore levels of engagement and perceived benefits from the perspective of users.

4. Participants

The participants were all involved in teaching and supporting students on the level 0 Access programme at the Open University, UK. Three Access ALs contributed to the design of the intervention. The intervention included seven ALs and four other staff from the Access programme. Nine of these completed the survey evaluating the effectiveness of this intervention.

5. Procedure

The project gained ethical approval through the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and Staff Survey Project Plan Application (SSPP) approvals at the Open University. In preparation for the intervention, an online portal – the ‘Hues Art Gallery’ – was developed. It would be inclusive, easy to use and accessible to all ALs. The Open Studio portal was set up on the Open University website, intended to provide participants with opportunities to share their creations and, using words and emojis, to respond to creative expressions, thoughts and experiences.

Following this, advertisements were released in the Access newsletter and forums, inviting ALs to take part. Those ALs who volunteered were asked to confirm their consent. Details of the study were provided, covering its purpose, the right to withdraw from it, matters of confidentiality and information for participants about the anonymised survey that would take place after the intervention. At the end of 2021, Hues gallery opened online for view, comments and display; it had four virtual rooms. Each room was open for two to three months during a nine-month period from November 2021 to August 2022. Participants were encouraged 1) to share artistic creations such as paintings, drawings, craft, sculpture or photography or creative written pieces such as poetry and short stories that they had produced while engaging in their hobbies over the previous few months and 2) to provide feedback about the creations that other members of the group uploaded.

In mid-July, with the opening of the last gallery, 4, the ALs were given a short online self-devised questionnaire to evaluate their experience of the intervention. The questionnaire covered

topics such as the importance of this intervention, the gains for participants and the things that could be improved further. All questionnaires were anonymised and evaluated for their themes and the value Hues had added to wellbeing of ALs.

6. Results and discussion

The first issue considered was participants' engagement with the intervention. Examples of uploads from the first and final gallery rooms are provided in figures 1 and 2.

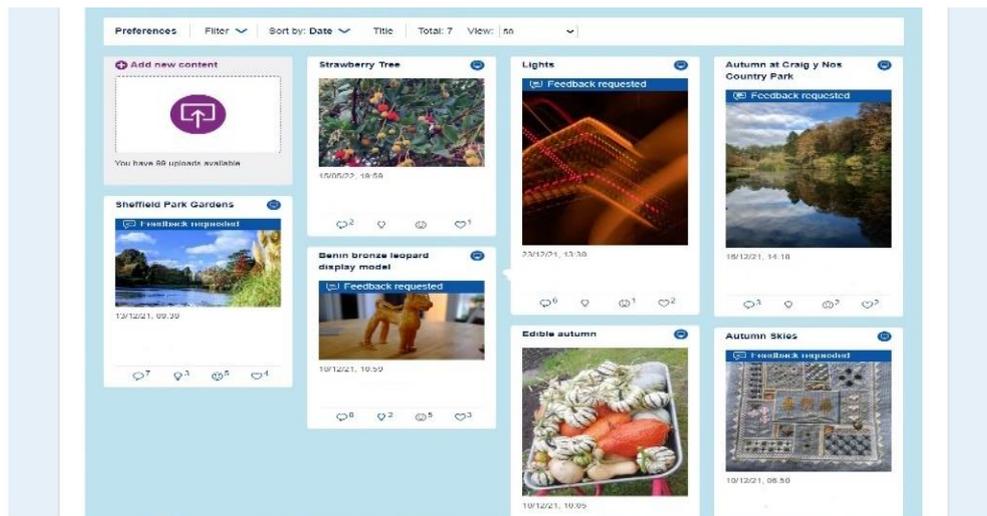


Figure 1. Examples of uploads in gallery 1

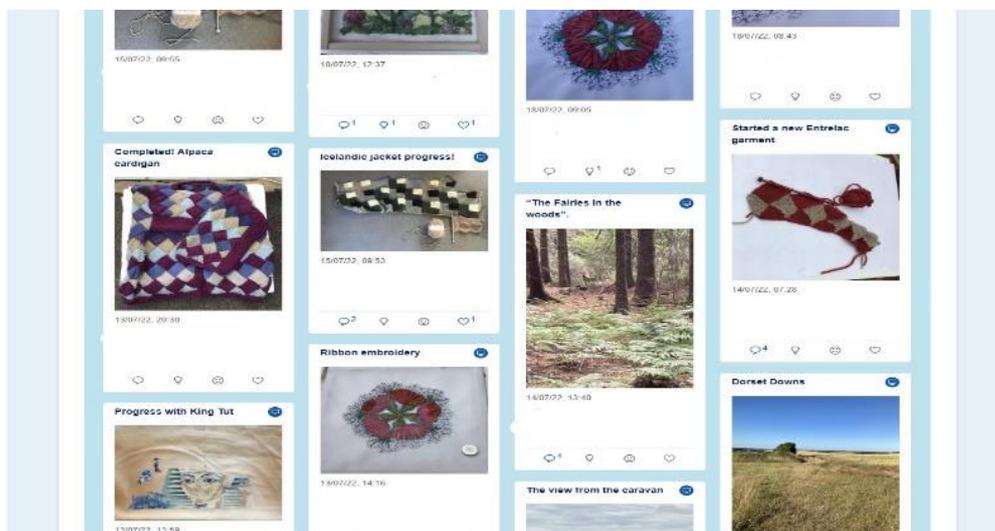


Figure 2. Examples of uploads in gallery 4

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As shown in table 1, below, there was a gradual increase in the number of uploads and verbal responses from galleries 1 to 3 and then a small decrease in the final gallery. Frequency of emoji responses was consistent.

Gallery number	Number of uploads	Number of verbal responses	Number of emoji responses
1	7	38	72
2	18	65	70
3	37	85	82
4	23	39	25
Total	85	227	249

Table 1. Uploads and responses for each gallery room

Surveys were returned by nine participants and the responses were incorporated into the evaluation and findings. All comments on the four galleries, together with survey responses, were read. Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) four key themes were identified:

1. connectedness;
2. away-from-work feeling;
3. happiness, enjoyment and positive feelings;
4. opening to new places, ideas, and shares.

These themes are illustrated with examples below.

In addition, the questionnaire indicated that most participants got to know about Hues through emails, newsletter and advertisements on the forums at the rollout of Hues. The responses from the staff indicated that a reminder about posting on the new galleries would be a useful way of developing this project further. The staff who engaged with Hues encouraged others to participate on the Open Studio too.

6.1 Connectedness

The theme of connectedness emerged in many survey answers and the comments on the Hues galleries.

“Having Hues was a real bonus for me as I could post up my progress as I work now in almost isolation”

“It was really nice to connect with other colleagues on something non work related. I think it is a really good way of seeing how talented and varied colleagues’ interests are.”

“Seeing interesting photos and pictures. It is a bit of light relief from the everyday academic aspect and nice to see creative things that people have been doing”

“It creates a sense of connectedness. I hadn’t thought about it in terms of well-being before, but yes, connectedness does enhance this”

“The visuals, the creative interaction with colleagues and sense of community.”

“... there was a very supportive vibe to the site with likes, favourites, emojis being used. I felt I was getting to know colleagues, many of whom I’d not met, and some whose names were new to me.”

The above results aligned with research that indicates the value of online spaces in building a sense of connectedness (Kostenius *et al.*, 2017; Toufaily *et.al.*, 2018). With more and more use of online space for teaching, it is effective to apply online resources to building a sense of community for distantly placed lecturers. Slagter van Tryon and Bishop (2009) propose that the special talents, specific knowledge and even the way the participants view the world around them become evident in the online interactions and spaces. In some studies, like that of Carpenter *et al.* (2015, p.122), criteria for connectedness indicate that *“people with high connectedness know many people and are those that are known to many”*. Interaction on Hues galleries was able to achieve this for many participants, as demonstrated by the comments above.

6.2 Away-from-work feeling

Though Hues was on the Open University website, this safe space created a feeling of being away from work, doing the academic tasks of marking assessments and supporting students. Studies recognise teaching as a stressful job (Gearhart, Blavdes and McCarthy, 2022; Iancu *et al.*, 2017; Crute, 2007). The qualitative analysis of the comments indicated that the AIs were able to gain some respite from their academic duties through their engagement on Hues.

“It is a bit of light relief from the everyday academic aspect and nice to see creative things that people have been doing.”

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“Yes, although we ‘speak’ in the various tutor fora it was good to share something outside of the everyday OU work.”

“It was nice to have a task to take me away from marking for a bit to give myself a mental break.”

“I liked the opportunity to share some things in a way I might not normally as it felt appropriate within the setting. This provided a reinforcement that there are other things in life other than work.”

6.3 Happiness, enjoyment and positive feelings

The survey responses and comments on Hues indicate the positive expressions of happiness, self-worth and valuing each other. All galleries had an extensive use of emojis and exclamations. 249 emojis were used on the posts in each of the galleries, mostly depicting inspiration, hearts and smiley faces, but also used were strawberries, bikes, fairies, animals, sun, shrubs and plants. Various galleries included such accolades as follow:

“wow I never cease to be impressed by crafts people’s work. This kind of thing is beautiful!”

“Beautiful and how architecture can be made a feature in its own right.”

“It is just mesmerizingly beautiful! 🧑🏻 🧑🏻 🧑🏻 🧑🏻”

“WOW D...!!! I can imagine the joy and you riding that bike! 🏍️ 🏍️ 🏍️ 🏍️”

“This is really intriguing - I like the colours.”

“It makes me feel like I’m at a party. I really like it and I would never have guessed where it was taken.”

“Love this - random beauty!”

The above comments highlight a range of positive emotions and a sense of inter-relational positivity on Hues. Some studies highlight that happiness has a strong relationship not only with who we are but also what our relationship with the environment is (Morris, 2009, Rahm and Heise, 2019). The development of the Hues galleries enabled the participants to make a small change in their routine, by enabling them to create new relationships within the online environment with other people engaging with the galleries.

6.4 Opening to new places, ideas and shares

All participants recognised and appreciated interests, hobbies and places that were different from their own. The gallery provided an effective way of presenting a range of interests and ideas that included everyone and made them explore some things that they probably would not engage in individually. Recurring themes in most of the comments and survey were: a sense of peer networking, a sense of belonging and appreciative comments about the opportunity to be exposed to different skills and ideas. These findings are consistent with those of Keller-Schneider (2014) and show clearly that identifying new insights can enable people to build skills that can help them cope with the future demands.

“In my family, I am not such a good photographer! 😊”

“What talent in your neck of the woods, R”

“As soon as I saw the preview pic I thought ‘B52s’ (and I saw them play way back when - one of my favourite bands) Love the concept and fab picture. Groovy!”

“I am particularly intrigued by the hare towards the top - that looks very realistic, but I can't work out if it is metal or somehow embroidered?”

“I was looking at the dying back leaves and wondering if I just let them totally die down or not? (haven't ever done snowdrops before)”

7. Conclusions

Based on the findings of this small scale, exploratory study, some key recommendations are:

1. There is value in providing safe, inclusive, online creative spaces for teachers and lecturers, as well as students, to build, restore and encourage their wellbeing.
2. A range of mediums of expression should be allowed on these online spaces to include diverse creative activities including artwork, photography, sculpture and creative writing.
3. The ground rules for the online spaces should be set up before their launch.
4. The online space should be co-designed by the intended users.
5. Moderators should be in place to facilitate engagement in these online spaces.

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Further study is needed to understand fully the potential of this type of initiative, including tracking of engagement at critical points in the academic year. Future studies could also investigate and compare different online spaces, such as Open Studio and Jam Board, for their suitability from the user perspective.

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