



Caring and Sharing to Improve Students' Well-Being in Distance Learning

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Abstract

Students' well-being has become a recent concern in education. Many related literatures mentioned that well-being is one of the significant factors in determining students' success. However, many distance education students experience loneliness and alienation because of lacking social presence and social connectedness. Those problems resulted in a low level of well-being. To deal with the problem, the department carries out *Caring and Sharing* regularly. The program includes an e-lecture, webinar, greeting from the department, and alumni's story. The present research aims to explore the students' perception of *Caring and Sharing* in improving well-being. To achieve the purpose of the study, a narrative inquiry is employed. Three students from English Literature Department who joined *Caring and Sharing* were interviewed to know their perception and experience in the program. The finding shows that the students have positive reactions regarding *Caring and Sharing* and they agree that the program helps improve their well-being. It builds the students' sense of belonging, confidence, and motivation to study. Moreover, it also identifies aspects influencing their well-being in distance learning. The limitations of the findings are discussed for future research.

Keywords: *Well-being, distance learning, mental health*

Abstrak

Kesejahteraan siswa telah menjadi perhatian baru-baru ini dalam pendidikan. Banyak literatur terkait menyebutkan bahwa kesejahteraan merupakan salah satu faktor penting dalam menentukan keberhasilan siswa. Namun, banyak siswa pendidikan jarak jauh mengalami kesepian dan keterasingan karena kurangnya kehadiran sosial dan keterhubungan sosial. Masalah-masalah tersebut mengakibatkan rendahnya tingkat kesejahteraan. Untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut, departemen melakukan *Caring and Sharing* secara rutin. Program ini meliputi kuliah elektronik, webinar, salam dari departemen, dan cerita alumni. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali persepsi siswa tentang Peduli dan Berbagi dalam meningkatkan kesejahteraan. Untuk mencapai tujuan penelitian, penyelidikan naratif digunakan. Tiga mahasiswa Sastra Inggris yang tergabung dalam *Caring and Sharing* diwawancarai untuk mengetahui persepsi dan pengalaman mereka dalam mengikuti program tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa siswa memiliki reaksi positif tentang *Caring and Sharing* dan mereka setuju bahwa program tersebut membantu meningkatkan kesejahteraan mereka. Itu membangun rasa memiliki, kepercayaan diri, dan motivasi siswa untuk belajar. Selain itu, juga mengidentifikasi aspek-aspek yang mempengaruhi kesejahteraan mereka dalam pembelajaran jarak jauh. Keterbatasan temuan dibahas untuk penelitian masa depan.

Kata kunci: *Kesejahteraan, pembelajaran jarak jauh, kesehatan mental*

INTRODUCTION

Well-being is a growing topic in every domain. Despite the fact that it is directly tied to health, the definition of well-being is still up for debate. Each discipline perceives well-being differently, for example, economists and politicians measure well-being based on finance and prosperity, meanwhile, the focus of law enforcement is on crime (Halbreich, 2022). Veenhoven as cited in (Govorova et al., 2020) points out that the term well-being, satisfaction, and happiness are used interchangeably. Huppert as cited in Ruggeri et al. (2020)

defines well-being as a “combination of feeling good and functioning well; the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and contentment as well as the development of one’s potential, having some control over one’s life, having a sense of purpose, and experiencing positive relationships”. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines positive mental health as a state of well-being in which each individual is capable of realizing his or her potential, is able to deal with everyday pressures, is able to work successfully, and is able to contribute to the community (Aulia, 2018).

Recently, students’ well-being has become a focus of education. The educational institution should know the importance of well-being in education. Students with great well-being are indicated to have a variety of traits, such as a strong sense of school attachment, high academic achievement, and better physical and mental health (Aulia et al., 2020). Govorova (2020) found that well-being affects academic performance, and, similarly, Lister (2021) found that there is a relation between mental health and study outcome. Thus, student well-being should be put to attention. Students’ well-being refers to the psychological, cognitive, social, and physical functioning and capabilities that students need to live a happy and fulfilling life (OECD, 2020). Meanwhile, Adams, et.al as cited in Sun, et al. (2014) proposed six categories which encompass student well-being, namely, psychological, intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual wellness. This paper covers the psychological and emotional aspects of well-being which are related to mental health.

Experiencing changes can be frustrating for some people. That happens in education as well. The transition from high school to higher education can affect the students’ mental health, moreover, if the university has different learning approach and environment. An open and distance learning university has different ways of conducting education from conventional universities. The students should be able to learn more independently compared to those who study at “face-to-face” universities. This is a new experience for the students accustomed to face-to-face interaction in the classroom. The students enrolled in an open university have less interaction with both the teachers and their peers. This causes confusion which leads to anxiety and depression, then finally results in a low level of well-being. Some research found that the students show symptoms of moderate to a high level of stress influenced by distance learning (Abdul Ghafar et al., 2021);(Radwan et al., 2021); (AlAteeq et al., 2020);(Unger & Meiran, 2020). Furthermore, Lister et.al (2021) argues that distance learner students are more likely to have higher mental health difficulties compared to campus students.

Many factors affected the distance learners’ well-being. Pozdnyakova et al. (2017) stated that there are three factors contributing to the students’ psychological anxiety, namely, lack of direct contact between student and lecturer, alienation and isolation from the student community, and education process and learning results. Besides, poor internet connection, high academic workload, deadlines for assignments, learning environment, and family problems have a significant impact on psychological distress. Furthermore, Lister et.al (2021) divided the problems that triggered well-being into three categories, which are study-related barriers, skills-related barriers, and environmental barriers.

Due to the significance of student well-being in education, several measures are taken to enhance student well-being. Wingert, et al. (2022) suggested using mindfulness-based strengths practice. Aulia (2018) proposed wholeschool approach, involving school staff, parents, students, and the wider community. Another way is conducted by Munif, et al. (2021) which employs preventive (socialization, seminars, discussions, and religious lectures) and curative (consultation). Music-listening and music-making can also be used to support well-being as proposed by Liddiard et al (2021).

English Language and Literature Study Program also conducts a program entitled *Caring and Sharing* hoping to increase student well-being by increasing social presence. The program includes an e-lecture, webinar, Prodi Menyapa (greeting from the department), and alumni story. E-lecture provides synchronous learning with the lectures from the study program. In this session, the students can ask directly to the lecturer about the material which they don’t understand. Webinar invites experts in the fields related to the study program. It gives the students insight and more knowledge about language, translation, and the profession. Greeting from the department provides information on the study program, such as an online tutorial and advice on how to succeed in a course. Alumni story covers the testimony of their success stories both in pursuing further education and having a good professional career. This paper aims to explore the students’ perception of Caring and Sharing in improving well-being.

METHOD

This study used qualitative research. According to Crossman (2020), qualitative research is a type of social science research that collects and uses non-numerical data while attempting to interpret the significance of the data by looking at specific communities or locations to assist explain social life.

The subjects of the study are three students from English Literature Study Program who has joined *Caring and Sharing*. All of the participants, Andra, Betty, and Chaniago are pseudonyms. In order to address the research question, a narrative inquiry is employed.

To collect the data, an informal interview was employed via WhatsApp Video Call due to the researchers' and the participants' distance. An informal interview enables participants to reveal their stories more freely. Then narrative inquiry is utilized to interpret the data. Analysis of the data includes transcribing, coding, and creating the narratives of the participants. After transcribing, the transcription is given to the participant to review. In coding, each individual transcript was classified and using emergent themes, the individual narratives were constructed. A sequence of events reflecting the participants' perspectives, experiences, and ideas was offered through the narrative construction.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we retold the stories shared by the participants regarding their perceptions and experiences in *Caring and Sharing*. Each participant's story was presented, including the factors influencing their well-being, their perception of *Caring and Sharing*, and the program they like the most.

Andra's story – I feel that I know more about the study program

Andra is a sophomore in the English Language and Literature study program. At first, he didn't know much about the faculty members. He didn't know that there were more than 6,000 students in the study program either. After joining the program, he knows more about the lecturers, curriculum, and learning methods. He admitted that *Caring and Sharing* relieved his worry because he could ask the people related to the problem he faced and gave him more motivation to study.

Factors influencing Andra's well-being

Andra said that difficulties in asking and getting information made him depressed. He didn't know whom he should consult if he had any difficulties. A long response also added to his frustration. Further, he stated that the number of assignments is too much to handle because of his workload.

There are a lot of questions I had, but I don't know whom to ask, for example I want to know about the semester payment deadline. Sometimes, I called or came the regional office. The staff is helpful, but due to a lot of students, I have to wait for a long time to get my turn. I don't like waiting so it is rather stressful...too many assignments I need to finish within one week. It makes me stress because I work full time...Sometimes I have to finish my university assignments and my duty at work at the same time

Andra's perception of *Caring and Sharing*

He thought that *Caring and Sharing* was beneficial for his well-being because the questions which he always wondered about were answered directly by the lecturer or the alumni. Further, he said that the program encouraged him to be more confident and motivated.

*I hope the study program can continue *Caring and Sharing*, especially Prodi Menyapa, and invites more alumni. I like it when I can ask and share my problems directly with the lecturers at Prodi Menyapa. It gives me a sense of security because they are there to answer the questions. It feels like the confusion which usually burdens me is solved at that time. Then, I also like the alumni story who get a scholarship abroad. It gives me confidence because I used to think that having a degree from an open university will make me difficult to apply for a scholarship or other jobs. Now, I know that we are not different from campus students. From them, I learned that I had to study harder and have better time management if I want to be successful...Yes, they give me motivation to be better and better.*

The program Andra likes the most

Andra favored *Prodi Menyapa* because it enabled him to get information directly from the study program.

Well, I like Prodi Menyapa and alumni's story, but if I have to choose, I prefer Prodi Menyapa...As I said before, I can ask my lecturers directly. So, it helps me a lot. What usually worries me has been answered.

Betty's story – I'm not alone

Similar to Andra, Betty is in her second year of university. As an extrovert person, she felt lonely because of lack social presence and interaction. She rarely interacted with her peer and tutor because she chose online tutorial. Even though there was a discussion forum in the online tutorial, the tutors took a long time to give feedback. Sometimes, she tried to give comments to her peer's answer, but she didn't get any response. This condition made her sad and lazy to join the discussion forum.

Betty joined *Prodi Menyapa* and Webinar. She said that when her peer raised questions about their problem, she felt that she also experienced the same thing. She could feel them, thus it made her realized that she was not alone.

Factors influencing Betty's well-being

According to Betty, the lack of social presence and interaction contributed to her depression. Another factor was getting bad grade after an exam.

I get easily stressful in online tutorial because there is no one to talk to. My friends rarely respond to my comment. Sometimes, I think whether my friend neglects my comment deliberately or not. Yeah, there may be one or two who replied to my comments, and I get really happy...Some tutors give feedback fast, but some need a long time. I can understand it because the tutors may be busy with their job as well. But I hope that all tutors give feedback to me. Another factor is getting bad grade. I feel dejected if I got a C because it affects my GPA.

Betty's perception of Caring and Sharing

In her opinion, *Prodi Menyapa* has a positive implication for her well-being while webinar didn't affect her well-being.

Yes, of course, it helps. When I join Prodi Menyapa, I can know who my friends and lecturers are. I like it when the lecturer shows themselves and give us motivational words. I feel loved. I think that...ah...they care about us. They are willing to help us if we face problem, especially academic problem. I can see some of my friends in Zoom video as well. I know their faces. It makes me realize that I actually have a lot of friends. Although we didn't meet directly, it feels that we interact with each other in the classroom...My experience in webinar, I got more knowledge for sure, but mostly I watch the reruns on YouTube.

The program Betty likes the most

Since Betty only joined two programs, which are, *Prodi Menyapa* and webinar, she found that *Prodi Menyapa* affects her well-being the most. She likes the program where she can see her lecturers, friends, and even alumni through Zoom Meeting.

I can't say much about the other program because I only join Prodi Menyapa and webinar. For me, Prodi Menyapa is the most useful for me, especially if the source person is our lecturer. I got to know more about our study and meet the lecturer and friends. However, I hope that there is a rerun for Prodi Menyapa as well so that I can watch later.

Chaniago's story – I'm a part of the study program

Chaniago is now in his third year of university. He was accustomed to learning independently since it's been three years that he was enrolled in an open and distance university. He knew Caring and Sharing through the study program Instagram account, then he started joining it. At first, he watched the successful alumni's story. After the program, he also felt rejoice and proud knowing the alumni's success. He was grateful that he is also part of English Literature family. Further, he said that he was happy because there were a lot of programs provided by the study program for the students. In his opinion, it showed that the study program really cared for the students' need.

Factors influencing Chaniago's well-being

Related to Chaniago's well-being, his greatest fear was getting unsatisfactory grades. His well-being was also exacerbated by a bad internet connection, difficulties finishing tasks, and assignment deadlines.

For me, personally, I am OK if I don't interact much with the lecturers or my friends. I am used to it, and I prefer studying by myself. As a student, of course I am afraid that I get bad marks. I am afraid that I will not get a good job because of my bad grades. I think almost all my friends think the same way... Ya, online tutorial can be stressful, especially if I have poor internet connection. It's frustrating when I can't even log in to the system, especially if it's near to the deadline... Then, some assignments can be very difficult, and I don't know how to do it. It's also depressing... Oh, one more the assignment deadline. Sometimes, we registered in 5 courses in a semester. All of them have the same deadline. It's very tiring.

Chaniago's perception of Caring and Sharing

He agreed that Caring and Sharing was good for his well-being. It made him feel that he was loved because the program offered the information needed by the students. Further, it encouraged him to have more motivation to study.

I think the program is good for my well-being. Although I like studying alone, I am happy if the department conducts a program which facilitates the students' needs. I also feel that the lecturers are easy to reach because we see them quite often. It makes me think that we have a good relation. I feel loved and accepted as a student. Then, when I heard the senior's success story, I also feel proud that I join this family. Their story inspires me to have more motivation to study. Then, I reflected to the skill that I should have improved, especially in managing time.

The program Chaniago loves the most

Chaniago mentioned that he loved alumni's story the most. It inspired him to study more. He also stated that he was interested in e-lecturing. However, the e-lecturing that has been done is not the course that he needed. He hoped that the study program continued the e-lecturing.

I guess the alumni's story. I love listening to successful story of a person because it motivates me to be successful as well. It encourages me to strive for my dream. Actually, I like e-lecturing, but at that time, it wasn't for my course, so I didn't really pay attention to it. I hope that the department have more e-lecturing because we can ask directly to the lecturers about the material which I haven't understood.

Discussion

The perceptions and experiences of the students in joining Caring and Sharing have been described so far. A collective story that will be interpreted can be found in the participant accounts. The researchers explore the narrative for the linked themes that emerged. Three key themes are discerned from the data interpretation. These topics cover things like the factors influencing the participants' well-being, their perception of *Caring and Sharing*, and the program they love the most.

Factors influencing the participants' well-being

From the participants' story, we can learn that their well-being is mainly affected by four categories. The first one is related to academic matters, especially assignments which include the number of assignments, the difficulty in doing the assignments, and the deadline of the assignments. Another academic related factor is getting bad grades. It is in line with Pozdnyakova et al (2017) that claimed learning process and outcomes are contributing factors to well-being.

The second factor is poor facilities and service. These factors can be linked to Ghafar et.al (2021) stating that poor internet connection and learning environment are sources of the students' anxiety. Online Tutorial relies mainly in internet connection. Students enrolled in distance education, particularly those who reside in rural areas, must travel to a higher region to acquire an internet connection. When numerous students are using the online tutorial at once, the internet connection can become unreliable. The students are afraid that they cannot submit the assignment before the due date. This poor internet condition leads to their depression. Besides, academic service can impact the students' well-being. Students need to seek help or consultation when they face some problems. The university has trained the academic staff to be able to help the students. However, given the large number of students and little number of personnel, it could take a while for the pupils to receive assistance.

The environment is another contributing factor to depression. Lister et al. (2021) also found that Work is one of the barriers that has the potential to result in low well-being. Some of English Literature students have a full-time job. They must divide their time between employment and university. The university has assigned the students with tasks that they must do in addition to any concurrent work. Due to their excessive workload, students may get physically and mentally exhausted.

The last category is related to social issues. Social issues here refer to the interaction and social presence. It is consistent with classification proposed by Lister et al. (2021) which specified space for both virtual and physical interaction as contributing to well-being. Distance education interaction is complex. The interaction is seldom conducted face-to-face. The participants mentioned lack of social presence and interaction make them feel lonely. Making friends is important in our lives. We need them to share our problem or just simply engage in a nice conversation. Hurem et.al (2021) stated that forming friendships lowers stress levels. That is why the university should provide a forum or platform so that students can interact with their friends. Not only among peers, interaction between the lecturer and students is also encouraged. The interaction gives more motivation for students, makes students commit to their study, and even influences the students to continue their study (Sason & Kellerman, 2022). Furthermore, studies on online learning have demonstrated the need of teacher-student interaction for successful learning and academic achievement in distance learning (Sason & Kellerman, 2022).

Perception of Caring and Sharing

All participants have a positive attitude toward *Caring and Sharing*. They agreed that the program is beneficial to improve their well-being. They mentioned that it gives them more motivation, confidence, and safety.

By meeting virtually with the lecturers, alumni, and their peers made them realize that they are not alone and isolated. Low well-being is a result, according to Pozdnyakova et al. (2017), of alienation and exclusion from the student community as well as a lack of direct interaction between students and lecturers. Therefore, carrying out a synchronous program, like *Caring and Sharing* is important for the students' well-being.

The participants added that the program strengthened their sense of belonging. Lyons et.al (2016) and Wilczyńska et al. (2015) stated that positive relationships exist between psychological well-being and a strong sense of belonging. Sense of belonging means "experience of a personal involvement in a system or environment, which makes people feel that they are an integral part of this system or environment" (Wilczyńska et al., 2015). The program is frequently conducted that the students feel loved and accepted. They believe they get along well with the faculty members, that they can contact them easily, and that the staff genuinely cares about them.

It is also clear from their stories that *Prodi Menyapa* and the Alumni's story can benefit them. The influence of e-lecturing is still unknown because no participants mentioned it as a factor in their well-being. The frequency of the program also has an impact. The study program has only had one e-lecture thus far that the students haven't felt the need of the program. One participant claimed that attending webinars had no effect on their well-being. The nature of webinars, where students mostly listen to the presenters and two-way interaction is infrequent, may have an impact. In the chat, the students posed questions, and the presenters responded without engaging the audience further.

The program the participants love the most

Two of the participants choose *Prodi Menyapa* as the most favored program, while the rest prefer alumni's story. The main reason of choosing *Prodi Menyapa* is that they can meet and consult directly with the lecturers. In alumni's story, the participants stated that they have greater drive to study and become a successful person.

The study program needs to hold more *Prodi Menyapa* events where lecturers are involved and where more alumni are invited to share their success stories.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that four categories had an impact on the participants' wellbeing. The first aspect has to do with academic issues, like homework and grades. Poor services and facilities are the next factor. The environment is a further factor. The final one has to do with social issues. The participants who took part in the program said that it improved their wellbeing. They become more motivated, self-assured, and secure as a result. Furthermore, the study program gives them a greater sense of social presence and belonging. *Prodi Menyapa* and Alumni's Story is the program that they enjoy and find most helpful.

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