Kidding Around: Using Play to Enhance Students' Well-Being and Learning

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The perceived mental health crisis on college and university campuses worldwide has been the subject of much public discourse in the past decade. Often, the conversation gains volume after the occurrence of tragic events such as a campus shooting or multiple suicides at a university and quietens between these events. Fortunately, although the tendency of these conversations is that they happen reactively in response to tragic events, many university administrations have not let the dialog cease on campus but have encouraged it in a structured manner, leading to the development of new mental health strategies. Many of these mental health strategies urge all members of the campus community, including librarians, to assume a role in ensuring the emotional and mental well-being of students and other staff members at the university.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a "state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, [and] can work productively and fruitfully" (WHO 2014). A mental health condition is defined as a wide range of mental and emotional problems that could affect one's ability to perform these functions including depression, stress, feelings of isolation, and anxiety.

The rate of mental health conditions, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed, in post-secondary students has increased significantly in recent years (Storrie 2010). Furthermore, a greater percentage of students suffer from mental health conditions and emotional distress than their non-student peers (Roberts 2002). There are a variety of reasons for this. First, more students are arriving at university with diagnosed mental health issues (Storrie 2010). Second, undergraduate students are faced with numerous major life changes, such as moving away from family and friends, creating new social connections, needing to handle problems without parental assistance, and potentially financial concerns (Devulapalli). Academic demands and the need to adjust to more impersonal relationships with their professors and the teaching styles utilized at universities can serve as a trigger for some students (Iarovici 2014). Finally, some students may also crumble under the high expectations of excellence imposed on them by parents and magnified by personal expectations.

The American College Health Association (ACHA) periodically surveys American and Canadian post-secondary students about their health; students are asked to self-report their physical, emotional and mental health experiences in the preceding 12 months in the National College Health Assessment. The recent ACHA surveys of Canadian and American students show that 89% and 86% of students, respectively, felt overwhelmed by their workload in the previous year. Almost two-thirds of the students felt very sad, a third "felt so depressed that it was difficult to function" and over 50% admitted to feeling "overwhelming anxiety" in that time period (ACHA 2013 and 2014).

Fostering the ability of students to develop coping mechanisms and to overcome these emotions so that they may perform well at school and in their personal lives is of critical importance to university administrators. This is furthered with the awareness that adults

in this age group have the highest percentage of diagnoses of clinical depression and chronic anxiety (APA 2015). This reported number from the APA is incomplete: the ACHA survey indicates that more than three-quarters of students did not report any of their mental health concerns to a professional and are not reflected in the APA's figures (ACHA 2014).

Consequences and Responses

Mental health conditions, such as depression, loneliness, and stress, can drastically impact students' everyday lives, even affecting their physical health (Iarovici 2014). These conditions have been called learning problems as they can impair the student's intellectual flexibility and creativity and dampen the student's interest in new ideas and knowledge (Douce 2014). Of concern to administrators focused on their graduation rates, these conditions can cause students' grades to drop, potentially leading to academic probation or resulting in students dropping out of school (Megivern 2003).

Even more alarming are the number of students whose emotional and mental state leads them to consider or take more extreme actions. Almost 6% of students deliberately injure themselves through actions such as cutting and burning, and approximately 8% of students seriously contemplated and 1.3% attempted to commit suicide (ACHA 2013 and 2014). While these percentages may seem low, a medium-size campus of 12,000 students would have 780 students self-injuring, 960 students considering suicide, and over 150 attempting suicide every year. The introduction of alcohol exacerbates the problems – approximately 15% of the students who drank alcohol physically injured themselves (ACHA 2014).

Less commonly, students suffering from a mental health condition injure others. The ACHA survey only asks about injuring others while under the influence of alcohol, showing that 3% of male and 1.3% of female students had physically hurt others while intoxicated (ACHA 2014). Other serious injurious incidents, such as campus shootings and mass murders, while rare and not reported in the ACHA survey, are highly traumatic and devastating events.

The accumulative effect of this has led many administrators to scrutinize the mental health services and programs in place at their university. What most learned is that addressing mental health issues is the sole prerogative of the campus' counselling staff and that the demand for their services has significantly increased in recent years, with students presenting with more severe issues (Prince 2015). Furthermore, most university counselling centers solely provide short-term counselling services, with only 28% open to seeing students as long as needed (Gallagher 2014). University counselling services frequently refer students to off-campus psychologists or psychiatrists.

In Canada, the issues surrounding the mental health crisis on university campuses have been addressed at both the national and local levels. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) hosted a workshop for university leaders to discuss collaborative initiatives as well as actions individual universities could implement and the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) developed a supporting document titled *A Roadmap for Federal Action on Student Mental Health* discussing the role the federal government should play.

In 2013, Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) collaboratively developed documentation to assist universities who want to create "a campus community that is deeply conducive to transformative learning and mental health" (CACUSS 2013). The guidelines recommend universities undertake a "shift in culture that recognizes that the entire post-secondary community is responsible for the mental health of its members and that mental health affects learning" and for the campus community to consider what each department is "doing to foster the development of a supportive campus community" (CACUSS 2013). They also focused on creating an environment which allow students to develop "self-management competencies and coping skills [which] strengthen

students' resilience and ability to manage the multiple demands" in their lives. Practical competencies identified include "maintaining health and wellness" and "managing emotional responses" (CACUSS 2013). Many universities have, in fact, developed new mental health strategies or policies in-line with CACUSS's guidelines, and exhort departments and personnel to contemplate how they could smooth their students' adjustment to university, help them feel more connected to the campus community, and develop coping mechanisms – skills which will aid them at university and in real life.

Librarians, as members of the campus community, should think about how their actions can impact students' emotional and mental well-being – either positively or negatively. Library facilities should be examined with fresh eyes to determine "[t]o what degree do these spaces reinforce behaviors that promote or undermine learning and mental health? Is there adequate quality learning, … and social space?" (CACUSS 2013). Do we have enough spaces that allow, and even encourage, co-curricular learning? Library events and activities should be evaluated to determine the values conveyed to students and whether any groups or individuals may be slighted or feel excluded from them (CACUSS 2013).

Benefits of Play
In a nutshell, play is any absorbing, apparently purposeless, fun, voluntary activity that provides one with an opportunity to forget about time and self (Brown 2010). This expansive definition provides librarians with a wide latitude in creating playful activities. Why focus on play? Playing positively affects humans both physically and psychologically in ways that would be beneficial to university students.

Many forms of play, including coloring and knitting, can be used as stress reduction techniques. Contrary to what observers of rowdy video game play would expect, studies have shown that playing video games (even mildly violent ones) reduces players' stress levels (Roy 2015). Partaking in these activities allows individuals to focus on something else and tune out stressful thoughts. Besides momentarily reducing their stress, video games may actually help long-term players learn how to handle stressful situations in the future (Ferguson 2010).

Play can positively affect one's stress on a physical level. It can reduce the stress hormones in the bloodstream (Lloyd 2009) and change one's heart rate, resulting in a calm feeling (Dovey 2015). Play is relaxing as it "lowers the activity of the amygdala, a basic part of our brain involved in controlling emotion that is affected by stress (Santos 2014)."

Play can help participants feel better. Dopamine is released in the brain when a participant is successful in a quest, whether finding a puzzle piece or reaching the next level in a video-game, lifting one's mood (Bergland 2011). A research study that examined the EEG results of participants playing the Peggle video-game found the participants had "increased right alpha brain wave activity associated with excitement or euphoric behaviors" (Russoniello 2009).

Some people laughed when hearing of Silicon Valley employers installing ping-pong tables, video game consoles, free ice cream bars, and other fun-filled features in their corporate offices, but research shows that taking time to play can increase one's effectiveness at work or study. Play "energizes and enlivens us" (Brown 2010) increasing our productivity and focus. It can also help improve our memory and creativity through the release of dopamine in the brain (Bergland 2011).

Play, especially virtual reality and strategic games, encourages those engaged to analyze all possible moves and the resulting implications and consequences of each, (Brown 2010) allowing participants to become more adaptable and creative. Contemplating different possible actions opens us up to options and connections we might not have seen otherwise. Games that require

concentration and strategic thinking, such as chess, Risk, and Settlers of Catan, help develop or enhance problem solving abilities. This assists with brainstorming activities as well as decision making (Gallagher 2013).

Play also enhances one's cognitive ability. Studies have found a direct correlation between the amount of play and the development of the brain's frontal cortex and the "rate and growth of the cerebellum" (Brown 2010). The frontal cortex is the area of the brain responsible for "discriminating relevant from irrelevant information, … and organizing our own thoughts" which is particularly beneficial to students doing course work and the cerebellum "is responsible for key cognitive functions such as attention, language processing, sensing musical rhythm, and more" (Brown 2010). These physical impacts are long-term, especially in individuals who play on a regular basis.

The benefits of play to post-secondary students is obvious. Participating in fun, playful activities can reduce the students' stress levels, make them feel better and help them focus on their school work. The longer-term effects of play on their brains could increase their cognitive abilities which would, hopefully, allow them to perform better academically. Instead of admonishing students for "wasting their time" playing, librarians should consider providing students with the opportunity to take a break from studying to play, especially during the most stressful times of year.

The following case study describes fun-filled activities and events the librarians at the University of Calgary developed to provide students with moments of stress relief and the opportunity to refocus their minds.

UCalgary Case Study of Play and Libraries
The University of Calgary (UCalgary) is a public, graduate degree-issuing university located in Calgary, Alberta. UCalgary is a large Canadian university with a student body of over 30,000. Libraries and Cultural Resources (LCR) at UCalgary is composed of a main university library, six branch libraries, an off-site high density library, the university archives, special collections, and two art galleries.

In April 2014, Calgary was shocked by the stabbing deaths of five young adults on the last day of the university's classes. The perpetrator was a recent UCalgary graduate who admitted to killing the five students but was found not criminally responsible as he was suffering from a psychosis at the time of the incident (Martin 2016). One of the five victims was an UCalgary student while the remaining victims attended other local colleges and universities. This shocking event caused the UCalgary administrators and student government association (Student Union) to review the mental health support and programs available at the university.

The immediate first step the administration at the University took was to establish the UCalgary Strong initiative. Not only did this important initiative involve workshops and counselling focused on personal wellness but it recommended an emphasis on engagement and building connections. The creation of the UCalgary Strong Festival offered the campus community an alternative to the regular end of year, outdoor party. The Festival brings together students, faculty, staff and community members to celebrate the end of classes in a fun, engaging and positive way. Some of the activities on the day include a photo booth, obstacle course, fort building and a craft market for shopping. This has now become a yearly event.

Both faculties and the Student Union were encouraged and motivated to offer much the same type of opportunities for students throughout the year. One such event is the now regular occurring Stress Less Week. This week occurs near the end of the semester when students' ability to cope with stress is at its most tenuous. In our various libraries we have events including knitting, games, meditation, and more. There are numerous opportunities for library staff to brainstorm

and participate in these types of activities.

UCalgary released their new mental health strategic plan in December 2015. The strategic plan contained six focus areas:
- Raising awareness and promoting well-being
- Developing personal resilience and self-management
- Enhancing early identification and response
- Providing direct service and support
- Aligning institutional policies, processes, and procedures
- Creating and sustain a supportive campus environment

(UCalgary 2015).

The first and last of these focus areas were of particular interest to the LCR personnel. The first includes services and programs relating to individuals' personal well-being. The last encourages everyone to develop events and activities that bring members of the University together to strengthen the sense of community and help the students feel more connected to the institution and other people there. Play and fun-filled activities would support both of these focus areas.

In the 2015-2016 academic year, librarians across the LCR locations devised a number of playful activities and events for students and staff.

Colouring and Crafting
Our "snowflake station" pop up event had students creatively designing and cutting out snowflakes during the stressful exam season. Students then wrote inspirational messages to each other and hung their flake on string to decorate an entry space in the main library, the Taylor Family Digital Library ("TFDL"). A key component to this activity was the time staff took to chat with students while they were cutting out or hanging up their snowflake. Staff would chat with students about their program of study, where they are in their exam schedule and plans for the holiday break. Taking the time to engage with our students in activities like these shows them that we have a genuine interest in their lives on and off campus.

Colouring books have become a popular activity for our students at almost all our locations. The Law Library distributes pages from adult and children's colouring books to students during the school year. Staff in our Special Collections department created their own colouring book containing images from their collection; the books, pencils, and crayons are offered for free at the main Service Desk in the TFDL during the stressful midterm season. In our Education Library students are invited to contribute to a large colouring activity by spending time adding their touches to a 24 X 24 inch mandala. This group effort is then posted and showcased in the windows of the Library.

Morrow, Leeanne. 2015.

Seasonal activities

Decorating festive cookies is a tasty staple activity in our Business Library. Staff initiate this event by baking the cookies, bringing in all the icing and decorations. A centrally located table is laid out with all the cookies and decoration and students and staff sit and decorate together.

Creating a Christmas "book tree" has taken off as a playful idea in many academic libraries. Annually we have staff of all levels participate in assembling our book tree in the main entrance to the TFDL. The time lapse video we film of the assembly is our most popular share on social media. This past year the company that owns the coffee shop in the TFDL asked to participate with their student workers by building a gingerbread village to be included next to the tree. This became a popular "selfie" spot during the holidays.

Games

Chess, maker kits and puzzles are all deployed at our various locations. Our Education Library staff use playdoh, plasticine and other "hands on" kits from their collection to encourage a little bit of play every day. Our Business Library has a chess game that is left out for students and faculty to play anonymously. Players stop and make a move and then flip the card to say "white move" or "black move" to indicate whose turn it is next. Staff in the Law Library spend time assembling new puzzles during their breaks in the staff room. When puzzles are complete a new one is introduced to keep encouraging relaxation and play on break time. In the spring semester TFDL staff set up a kinetic sand spot in the Library and offer students the opportunity to stop, rake, build and run their hand through this weird and wonderful "part sand part toy". We have been able to leverage our "game based learning" space on the third floor of the TFDL as a spot for students to take a break and to share the space with community members and their children who were displaced to the University during recent forest fires in Fort McMurray in northern Alberta. Spaces were blocked off for kids each day to come with their parents and "game".

Wellness

Staff members in the law and business libraries are certified yoga instructors and have offered yoga sessions, along with relaxation breathing exercises and in-chair stretches that students can utilize during particularly stressful times.

Partnering with the Wellness Centre and Student Success Centre, we brought in a Registered Massage Therapist to offer students free 10 minute chair massages during our "Wrap up the Term" daylong event. After visiting the massage station students are encourage to visit another table where they can build their own stress balls with balloons and rice. Having a Gallery connected to the Library allowed us a perfect opportunity to offer mediation sessions to students on the main Gallery exhibition floor during the Student Union's regular Stress Less Week.
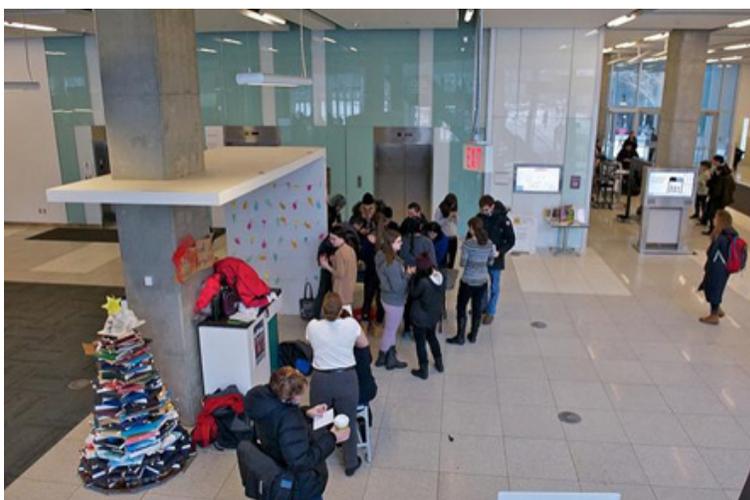
Morrow, Leeanne. 2015.

Spontaneous or scheduled?

These playful, stress reducing events can and should be offered on a regular basis for the betterment of students and staff members. There are a few different ways to schedule these types of activities. The first is by choosing to offer many of these events during a set, structured week. The Law Library offers their "Stress Less Week" as a set week every term and the staff design activities for engagement each day. Some of these activities include colouring, word find and jigsaw puzzles, and distributing stress balls and candy. Their most popular event of the week is their free Chocolate Fountain Station. This brings students, faculty and staff together to share a sweet treat.

If a week long, set schedule seems daunting, then "pop up" spontaneous events are also a good way to encourage play. You can plan these on an "as needed" basis. The Snowflake Station hosted in the TFDL was planned in response to an increase in confrontational incidents occurring between students in the library. The planning was done three days before it was put up and everything was taken down as soon as exams were finished. With a little bit of flexibility and creatively you can be responsive to student needs with pop up type events.

Another approach to scheduling play activities is to encourage staff to incorporate this playful approach into their daily duties and make these events recurring, every day. Staff in the Business and Education library offer a "quote" jar and encourage students to read a quote while waiting for help at their Service Desks. In our Education Library, staff plan larger, themed events but you will see something fun and engaging to do on a daily basis in their space. Whichever way you decide to plan these events over time, and with repetition they will likely assist in changing the culture within your workplace.
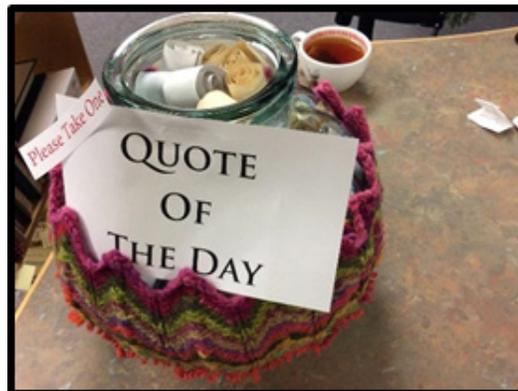
Tips for success

Consider these helpful suggestions to ensure success with incorporating play into your Library:

- Include all levels of staff in the planning and implementation of these events. Staff will surprise you with their feedback and how engaged they become with the activities.
- Find opportunities in each event that encourage interaction between staff and students. Having some time to "stop and talk" with your patrons really shows you are interested in their well-being.
- Make full use of social media to help in promotion of your events. These online social tools can also be a great way to assess the popularity of your event and a great documentation resource.
- Push the boundaries of what you plan—even if you think it might be silly. You may think playing with scissors, crayons and sand is too childlike but that might be just what a student needs to unwind after a stressful day of exams.
- Always be open to working with other partners to plan and implement events. This spirit of collaboration is a great model to your students, faculty and staff. New partners may also bring new ideas and new resources to your activities.

Conclusion

Some of the greatest results from implementing this type of approach to our work at the University of Calgary includes not only lifting the spirits of students and staff but also strengthening our connection to our patrons and their needs. Focusing on this type of interaction with our students goes a long way to showing them we care and as one student mentioned during Stress Less Week in the Law Library "you always take such good care of us". This new approach is a win-win for everyone: students win through the benefits of the fun, playful activities and we win because it enhances our relationship with them. Overall, play in libraries expands and solidifies our role as being central to the academic, social and emotional success of students on our campus.

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