

Education for mental health case study

Issues in international politics/
Department of Political Economy

Dr Rebecca Upsher

King's College London



Contents

Context	2
Outcomes of module	3
Development of module	4
Pedagogic approaches to promote student wellbeing	4
Challenges	6
Advice for other academics from module leader	6

Context

In the department of Political Economy, there were concerns about the number of students with mental health concerns, often relating to anxiety or depression. The module leader of the 'Issues in International Politics' module, Dr Keith Smith, wanted to embed wellbeing in the curriculum to be proactive, rather than just being reactive to any student mental health problems that might arise.

"I was listening to a webinar the other week by Cathy Elliot at UCL on pastoral support...She was talking about different governance regimes...she was advocating for a caring regime based on the idea of learning, teaching and education as a collaborative enterprise". Dr Keith Smith, module leader

With this mind, the 'Issues in International Politics' was adapted. The module teaches theoretical and empirical content regarding international relations (IR) and examines the meaning of theory and how the IR discipline is pluralistic and fragmented when it comes to theory. The module considers student wellbeing by being structured around different human emotions including compassion, sorrow, anger, fear, trust, anxiety, guilt, dissonance, optimism and confusion.

Sessions for Nursing Students

Week 1: Compassion: Is foreign aid a help or a hindrance?

Week 2: Sorrow: Why is sex trafficking an issue in the 21st century?

Week 3: Anger: Is violence political / is rebellion just?

Week 4: Fear: Is great power conflict inevitable during great power transitions?

Week 5: Trust: What are the barriers to interstate cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation and how can they be overcome?

Week 6: Anxiety: What does the term cyberwar mean? And is it real?

Week 7: Guilt: Do contemporary agents have the moral responsibility for righting historical injustices?

Week 8: Dissonance: Borders should be shut when national security necessitates it. Discuss.

Week 9: Optimism: Are we facing a crisis in the current "world order"?

Week 10: Confusion: Is theoretical diversity and plurality a good thing?

Outcomes of module

The module aims to:

- + Provide students with a sense of ownership, giving them autonomy over their learning.
- + Build on the introduction to IR theory (learnt in first year) by exploring the main theories in greater depth.
- + Apply these theories to specific issues.
- + Introduce a number of contemporary political issues and examine the key debates within academia concerning those topics.
- + Engage, over the module as a whole, with some of the core questions of political economy, such as what is power, who has it and how is it exercised?

Key module information	
Typical intake	70-100 students (smaller groups for seminars)
Format	Lectures and seminars; Face-to-face
Level of study	Undergraduate second years
Status	Optional
Credited	Yes
Assessment	Summative at end of module, one essay (50%) and one exam (50%; 2 hours)
Assessment feedback	Comments and grades
Location*	Lecture hall/classroom
Teaching staff	Teaching fellow/Graduate Teaching Assistant
Duration/frequency	Weekly over 10 weeks; one lecture (1 hour) and one seminar per week (1 hour)

*This information refers to usual circumstances (not under Covid-19 restrictions).

Development of module

This module has run since 2013 and since 2017 has been structured relating to different emotions. In recent years the module has been developed to include topics with greater diversity based on geography, gender and race to reflect diversity of student cohort. For example, by including voices from the geographical locales through reading tasks eg:

- + The reading for the week on India is by a well-known writer and activist, Arundhati Roy.
- + In the week on China, students read a piece in English from a Chinese scholar in a Chinese journal on the Chinese school of international relations.
- + When studying trust and nuclear cooperation between Argentina and Brazil, students read an Argentinian historian.
- + The week on historical injustices and Korean comfort women has a Korean-American author.
- + The main author for the week on foreign aid in sub-Saharan Africa is an economist from Zimbabwe.

Pedagogic approaches to promote student wellbeing

- + Incorporating a weekly Padlet link for students to input their questions and topics for discussion in seminars so the discussion is guided by students and not pre-set questions. This platform is anonymous and helps bridge the gap between extroverted and the more introverted students, enhancing a collaborative learning experience and decreasing isolation.
 - + 'Feed forward' rather than 'feedback'. The students had the opportunity to look at the proposed lecture content and offer suggestions for anything they wanted added.
 - + Writing to students with Study Inclusion Plans at the start of term. The idea here was to say: "Here, I've seen your Inclusion Plan, here is what I understand it to mean, and here is how the class is going to be taught. Is this ok and is there anything I can do to minimise the stress in this process?"
 - + Weekly email from module leader to students including topics in the news, new academic literature, information on internships, local news, a weekly meme or tweet, and a weekly song.
 - + Revision session before an exam, signposting students to relevant resources to alleviate anxiety.
-

Dr Keith Smith described his tips for creating an open space in seminars where students could feel comfortable to discuss emotions and issues:

“...before the start of the seminar I would go around each of them, say good morning or hello X, how are you, and is there anything you want to talk about?”

Dr Keith Smith, module leader

- + Open rapport by learning names and learning about students.
- + Building trust relations, this helps when teaching same cohort of students i.e., from first to second year.

“I think personally I benefit from not being scary or intimidating. I think I am quite good in making students open up and not be concerned with that ‘fear of authority’ figure. This is a strength in the classroom; it is a massive weight around my shoulders in the academic world. I think, as well, I’ve rarely found myself asserting intellectual authority in seminar room.”

Dr Keith Smith, module leader

- + Saying how something makes you feel rather than what does X say about Y eg, phrasing something like: “This is what I found interesting...” “I found this interesting because...” “What did you find interesting...”. This helps to use the seminar space as a place to discover.
- + As a lecturer/teaching staff, paint yourself as a student, as a fellow traveller in the voyage of discovery.
- + Celebrate being uncertain or being unsure, admitting when you’re wrong or you don’t know. Demonstrating that you’re a fallible, imperfect human being.
- + Offer encouragement to students when responding: “That’s a really good point” “That’s interesting because...” Not going “Well you’re wrong and here’s why you’re wrong”.

Challenges

- + Assessment style. This module is quite 'traditional' in terms of assessment via an essay and exam. However, only a minority do well in exams. Anecdotally, the module leader senses that students would be stressed by a completely new style of assessment. For example, only two out of around 160 students chose to complete a reflective essay that strays from the regular type of assessment. However, there is belief that with correct scaffolding students could do well in non-traditional assessments to aid learning and wellbeing.
- + Some content in this module is quite emotive, for example, stories around sex trafficking. Other topics can be divisive politically eg, colonialism and slavery.
- + The students have a range of political views so it can be challenging to accommodate this when topics can generate polarised views. The tip is to try and let everyone have a voice, then communicate that they should 'agree to disagree'.

Advice for other academics from module leader

- + Be a human being and treat the students as human beings. This includes, learning their names, speaking to them before and after lectures, saying hi to them if you pass them on campus.
- + Communication is key- not just in lecture or seminar but outside of this allocated timeslot eg, accessible office hours or via email.
- + The way that the curriculum is taught is more important than content.
- + Think about what we mean by 'education' and challenge resistance to embedding wellbeing in the curriculum.

"We often fail to remember that teaching is actually a caring profession. We have a duty of care to our students whether we appreciate that fact or ignore it. The more we do or even signal that, the more students appreciate it and think somebody is actually looking out for them. It might not be the curriculum that wellbeing needs embedded in; rather it might be our teaching practice."

Dr Keith Smith, module leader

Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201

enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500

communications@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

   @AdvanceHE

Advance HE enables excellence in higher education, helping it shape its future. Within the UK and globally, Advance HE supports institutions in the areas of excellence in education, transformative leadership, equity and inclusion and effective governance. This is delivered through membership benefits (including accreditation of teaching, equality charters, research, knowledge and resources), programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, consultancy and enhancement services and student surveys.

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607 Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

Unless stated otherwise, Advance HE is not the copyright owner of these case studies. The details and content of the case studies must not be used in any form without the prior express permission of the relevant author(s).

© 2022 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at Advance HE: +44 (0) 3300 416201 or publications@advance-he.ac.uk