



CAWRI

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

International students creating comedy to foster wellbeing: 'Are you joking?'

Final report

November, 2022

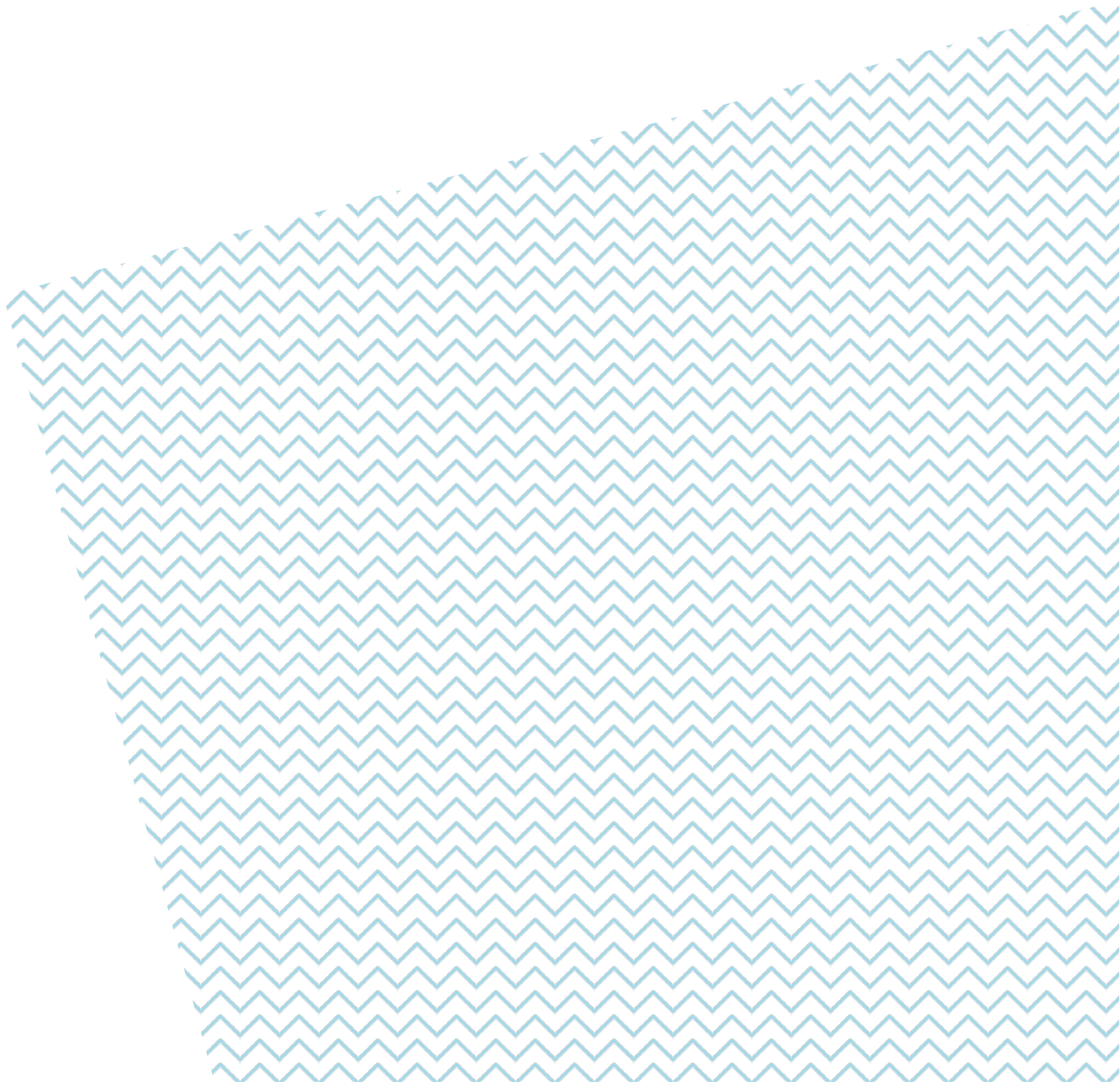


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Project summary

The intention behind this interdisciplinary CAWRI project was to use comedy, in this instance stand-up comedy, to foster wellbeing in international students studying at the University of Melbourne. The comedy workshops were originally intended to be face-to-face but due to Covid-19 restrictions implemented in Melbourne, from the outset they were moved online. Participating in a series of workshops led by a professional comedian, the international students from the University of Melbourne each developed a short comedy routine that was streamed live to an international audience. The findings indicate that the comedy workshops afforded a mediating space for students to reflect on their identity and the isolation they were experiencing during to the pandemic. It was also found that developing the comedic routines enhanced the students' sense of belonging and provided them with insights into the lives and cultures of the other participants in the project. An unexpected outcome of the project was that it proved to be highly successful in promoting wellbeing amongst the participants when they were studying at home (i.e., online) due to the pandemic.

The project ran in conjunction with an associated research project from August 2020 to December 2021.

Research team

Dr Richard Sallis	Melbourne Graduate School of Education, (Team leader)
Dr Diane de Saint Leger	Faculty of Arts – School of languages and linguistics
Dr Jane Lysk	Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences – Melbourne Medical School
Danielle Clayman	Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences – Melbourne Medical School
Kelly McConville	Melbourne Graduate School of Education (Research Assistant)

Partners

Justine Sless, BA. MA. Justine is the professional comedian who was employed to run the workshops.

Acknowledgements

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Background

Research context

A recent study of university students in Australia found that “... the mental health issues of university students are flying under the radar of policy attention and leadership in both higher education and mental health portfolios” (Browne et al 2017) with international students suffering higher levels of anxiety than domestic students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). International students have different factors that impact on their wellbeing to local students with one potential barrier to adjustment to university life being English language proficiency, which studies have shown increase levels of anxiety (Kim, 2020). In contrast, social support, especially through organised activities and programs, has been found to help international students make friends and better adjust to university life (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Carter and Sallis, 2019).

In 1975 international students only made up 5% of the student population at Australian universities. Since then, the number of international students studying at the University of Melbourne has steadily increased and is now sitting at around 36.6% (Rasmussen, 2018). Sophia Arkoudis’ (2018) report for the University of Melbourne notes the University’s vision of institutional cultural diversity but highlights many of the struggles international students have adjusting to university life in Australia, particularly for those with English as a second or third language. Challenges for this cohort include: learning and living in a different culture; learning in a foreign university context; learning while developing English language proficiency; and learning the academic disciplinary discourse (Arkoudis 2018, p. 5). This accords with the findings of Sallis’ (2022) research into international students studying to be teachers at the University of Melbourne. Timler and Villaça (2021) point to the ability of stand-up comedians to

provide insight into human positionalities, offer poignant social critiques, and can bring sensitive and uncomfortable subjects to the forefront of public discourse, including discussions around mental illness (p. 227).

Concomitantly, when developing this CAWRI project, the researchers were mindful that humour is a form of language play and has been found to enhance language acquisition (Hackathorn, 2011; Mohan, 2016) in second and or additional languages. However, in arguing that humour can help relieve anxiety in individuals and groups, Dionigi et al., (2021) assert that certain types of comedy may promote wellbeing whilst others may be counter-productive. For example, they have found that benevolent and satirical humour can promote wellbeing whereas cynical and sarcastic comedy may not.

Project aims

The aims of the project were to:

- Foster international student wellbeing by showing participants how to harness their creative potential and explore the funny side of life as international students in an Australian context.
- Gain an understanding into the ways collaborating to create and produce a comedy routine can foster wellbeing for undergraduate and postgraduate international students at the University of Melbourne.
- Explore cultural differences by working explicitly with the positive dimension of interruption, conflict and tension.

Methodology

This project employed a qualitative Arts Based Research (ABR) approach, (Sajnani, et al, 2019) whereby an arts activity is researched during its development and delivery with findings being fed back into the program as they emerge. According to O'Toole and Beckett (2013) qualitative methods of data collection is typically used in education and the arts, including when the two fields coalesce in the one project/event.

Participants were recruited through social media (the University of Melbourne's channels and others) as well through the Union House Theatre's weekly MailChimp newsletter, "Spotlight". Initially around 30 students agreed to take part in the project. As the project continued fewer and fewer students stayed the course, leaving only four students who were willing to perform at the project's end although several others continued to take part in the workshops throughout the program. This attrition rate was attributed to three key factors: first, the shift to online delivery of the program (necessitated by COVID-19 regulations), which some students found easy to disengage from, often without explanation; second, environmental issues brought about by Covid-19 including a lack of space at home in which to take part without interruption/disruption; and third, language difficulties, especially nuances of the English language.

The participants took part in a series of four workshops delivered via Zoom. During the workshops the participants shared stories and other artefacts based on their life as an international student at the University of Melbourne. Workshops were observed and, in accordance with the ABR approach, emergent findings and themes were fed back into the workshop series. As the workshops proceeded, students began to develop a performance piece based on stories about themselves that they were comfortable to share. The sharing was facilitated via a live online event with a worldwide audience.

Data included filmed recordings of workshops and the performances, transcriptions of workshops, performances, and a post-performance reflection session, as well as transcriptions of participant interviews conducted one-year post-performance. The intention of interviewing the participants one year after the performance was to gauge in what ways involvement in the project may have had a longer-term effect on them and their university life.

Cross-disciplinary collaborations/interdisciplinary connections

This project was a collaboration between Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Faculty of Arts - School of languages and linguistics, and Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. Each member of the three faculties contributed knowledge and skills throughout the project:

- Medicine:** scientific knowledge and understandings of wellbeing and youth and issues surrounding university students and wellbeing from a counselling perspective.
- Arts:** transnational study and perspectives, including those of international students. Perspectives of those for whom English is an additional language
- Education:** the interrelationship between drama/theatre and the promotion of wellbeing, running drama/theatre workshops for young people

As the project developed each member's skills and knowledge was integrated into it. More than that, it was found that team members mutually benefitted from their contribution and involvement. This was particularly evident in the interchange of information and experience from the drama educators and the medical team members.

Key findings

The findings from this project suggest that a correlation exists between international university students (undergraduate and postgraduate) being involved in a carefully designed and moderated stand-up comedy-based project and the enhancement of positive wellbeing (and potentially the prevention of illbeing). Importantly some of the international student participants claimed that they would relish the opportunity to be involved in similar projects in the future based on this experience. Regarding wellbeing specifically, the findings showed that being involved in the project the participants:

- Gained self-confidence
- Had a sense of being part of a community of practice
- Were able to share their thoughts and feelings about the impact of Covid-19 on their studies and life outside of it and learn from other international students who were sharing similar experiences
- Enjoyed the comedy aspect of the project, even though for some it was challenging, taking them out of their comfort zone
- Immersed themselves in the project and found it to be a useful outlet for how they were responding to the limitations placed on them by Covid-19
- Responded very positively to the workshops run by a professional artist, assisted by a trained educator from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education
- Gained a sense of achievement and enhanced self-worth/confidence by performing their material to an international audience and receiving feedback in real-time.

An unexpected finding was how well many of the student participants adapted to, and enjoyed, the online delivery of the workshops. During the online performance audience members posted many supportive comments in the chat which the performers could see at the time of their performance. Some reported that having such immediate feedback gave them added confidence and a sense of achievement.

When the longitudinal interviews were analysed, it was evident that the participants appreciated the opportunity to mix with other students from different cultures and they noted how much they bonded with others who were experiencing similar challenges to Covid-19 as they were. They noted that they had adopted some of the presentation and confidence-building skills they learnt in the workshops.

Project outcomes

The findings of the project have led to the development of a new University of Melbourne Breadth subject which will first be run in 2023. Entitled, *Drama, Education and Wellbeing* (EDUC20086) it will be run out of the MGSE and coordinated by Dr Richard Sallis.

Discussion, implications and future directions

There are some key implications to arise from the project. These are outlined below.

- A program of this kind can be run successfully online (even though this was not the original intention). However, given the high participant attrition rate which in part can be attributed to the online delivery, in-person delivery of the program may enable more robust conclusions to be drawn and highlight any differences between the two modes.
- The online delivery of the program enabled onshore and offshore international students to participate.
- The involvement of a professional artist may have been an initial drawcard for the students, but it was the nature of the workshops that was the biggest contributing factor to their continued engagement.
- The comedy workshops enabled the student participants to find ‘a time to relax’ in their weekly routine and to ‘reach out to’ other likeminded students.
- Although the study design did not include testing for evidence of English language skills improvement, some participants reported that their oral communication skills developed over the course of the workshops, including proficiency in their English language speaking and listening skills.
- Some student participants noted that, in having ‘stuck with’ the workshops even though at first feeling ‘vulnerable’ at having to ‘put [themselves] out there’, they were proud that ‘being brave’ they stayed the distance.
- It was noted that the student participants spent time between workshops developing their comedy routines and this demonstrated a commitment to and engagement with the program.

The involvement of a comedy creative

The original vision for ‘Are you joking?’ was for a professional comedy creative to deliver the workshops with researchers observing the process. With the move to online delivery, a research team member became more directly involved, initially to assist with the technical aspects. However, the role of the team member, a drama teacher and theatre director who has taught in both secondary schools and at tertiary level, soon expanded to that of collaborator, guiding the artist in teaching and learning techniques more broadly. From a practical and sustainable perspective, it is worth considering if future workshops may be best led by someone with both creative and tertiary teaching and learning expertise and experience.

Why some students ‘stayed the course’

Those student participants who stayed the course attributed to this to the ‘fun’ inherent to the project which gave them a reason to return each week and complete the required ‘homework’ tasks (even though not all of them presented their comedy routines at the end of the program). There was also a distinct sense that the participants were part of a community of practice and as such they did not want to let their colleagues down by withdrawing or not contributing as required.

Interestingly, it soon became evident that the workshops were not conducted in a vacuum; the impact of Covid on the project and the lives of the students more broadly were acknowledged by all and found its way into their stand-up comedy routines.

It was generally agreed by the academic team that the artist's reputation as a comedian was an initial drawcard, but that as the project developed what became more important was the team-based approach where everyone was free to share ideas and steer the direction of the performance. Whilst these factors contributed to an enhanced sense of wellbeing amongst the students, the academic team found the experience to be a positive one for them as well. This became apparent when the team began to watch the video recordings of the Zoom workshops and started to follow the path of the participants as they developed their stand-up comedy routines.

Online delivery – a plus, not a minus

Contrary to what the academic team expected, most participants responded positively to the online mode of delivery. Some claimed that the detached nature of being online gave them an added boost of confidence because they said and did things they might not have done in an in-person set of comedy workshops. Some student participants noted that the nature of the workshops initially seemed a little strange, for example when they were placed in break-out rooms with people they had only just met, but they soon adapted to the opportunities and limitations the online mode afforded them. The facilitators were absent from break-out rooms because it was anticipated that the students would appreciate having their own space where they could get to know each other and share ideas about their routines in a more relaxed and convivial atmosphere. When interviewed several months following the program the students reflected that they had bonded with each other in the breakout rooms, including sharing their Covid experiences and offering each other empathy, sympathy and support.

When the stand-up performance took place, one evening in October 2020, the online platform again proved to be advantageous. The international audience responded to the performances by providing comments through the Zoom 'Chat' function. Significantly the student-performers could see the 'Chat' being populated. The real-time comments gave those waiting to perform added confidence and for those who watched the Chat as they were performing the comments spurred them on; some even found time to respond to the comments as they were performing.

The project resulted in a set of predominantly encouraging findings indicating that the wellbeing of international university students was enhanced by an online program combining drama education and stand-up comedy. The researchers are keen to try out variations on the approach. First, we are considering running a project where the workshops are run in-person, as was originally intended, and compare the results to the online delivery mode. Second, given the higher than expected input of drama educators into the running of the workshops, the academic team would like to see what differences there might be if a series of comedy workshops were run by someone with a drama education background who also has a background in comedy.

Future Directions

The academic team who worked on this project found that the skills and knowledge the members brought to it were highly complementary. Subsequently, the researchers are looking at more ways that they can continue to work on interdisciplinary projects of this kind in the future and are

planning to apply for external funding to compare the outcomes of this project by running the program, as it was originally intended, in a face-to-face mode.

Meanwhile, the Drama Education academic team in the MGSE are applying for an internal seed grant to develop a pilot research project in 2023 based on the findings of this CAWRI project.

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More information

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