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Kendall Center Mini Grant

Introduction

Being diagnosed with breast cancer led me into an 15 month period in my life that involved a great deal of reflection and redirection. I began to explore the research on “resiliency” for two distinct but related reasons. First of all, I wanted to know what were the life style choices within in my control that gave me the greatest chances of landing in the “survivor” category. The second, was a persistent awareness that I already processed the education, research tools, and two specific “practices” (moving and writing) that positioned me well for this journey.

As I negotiated this new land of a person living with a cancer diagnosis, I found that time and time again, my movement practice (yoga based) and writing practice, calmed my anxiety and created enough of a clearing that I felt I could make well-informed choices. My academic training has prepared me to incorporate teaching movement into any class I teach. While I whole-heartedly believe in the writing across the curriculum component, and teach writing as part of every class, I feel far less knowledgeable about the pedagogy of teaching writing.

Problem/ Need

After being on medical leave during the spring of 2013, I returned to teaching full-time fall of 2013. I taught my First Term Seminar, entitled *Tell Me a Story*, which is grounded in the practice of writing personal narratives. I also taught my January term, BodyStories, which involves a significant personal narrative writing component. While I have taught this January term course for close to twenty years, and my FTS course for at least ten years, I have never had any substantial education in how to teach writing. I am trained to teach movement/dance, but I repeatedly find myself in the position of teaching, guiding and coaching writing. From my own experience and from the feedback I regularly receive from students, I believe writing can be an invaluable tool to support individual well being. So first and foremost, I want to learn to teach this tool far more effectively.

Second, and equally important, I believe more students are arriving at Gustavus lacking resiliency and coping skills for the negotiating the challenges, obstacles, and set backs that are part of undergraduate life. Recently, Gustavus adopted a set of Institutional Student Learning Outcomes. One of these specifically addresses the wellbeing of our students.

**College Understanding:** Well-being is a choice to assume responsibility for the quality of one’s life across multiple dimensions: intellectual, emotional, spiritual, vocational, career, financial, relational, environmental, and physical. It begins with a conscious decision to shape a healthy lifestyle. We strive to provide students with the intellectual and practical tools they need to live productive and healthy lives.

**Student Learning Outcome:** Students will develop an awareness of multiple dimensions of well- being and the intellectual and practical skills necessary to make thoughtful decisions in all dimensions of well-being.

To develop my skills in teaching writing, and incorporate this skill into both my classes and the campus-wide wellbeing initiative, I am requesting support to attend a three day workshop at Duke Integrative Medicine titled, Leading Patients in Writing for Health: A 3-day Training for Healthcare Professionals. The course is described as,

a comprehensive, experiential training that will help you understand how the cathartic processing of stress through the written word can free the body and mind to engage patients’ innate immunological healing potential.

The ground-breaking research of James Pennebaker provides a transformative opportunity for health and healing. Now, healthcare providers can learn how to apply his theories to benefit their patients in a three-day training at Duke Integrative Medicine.

The curriculum will provide easily adaptable lessons, activities, and guideposts so that anyone working in the healthcare field—physicians, nurses, mental health professionals, hospice workers, health coaches, and others—can use them with their patients.

Evans and Jooste will lead you through progressive learning that incorporates:

* Theory:  Understanding how and why writing can transform the trajectory of an individual’s health
* Research:  Reviewing more than 30 years of studies that demonstrate the efficacy of this healing modality
* Experience:  Engaging in the process actively, using the five modes of writing for health (expressive, transactional, poetic, affirmative, legacy), and developing and designing prompts that encourage writing for health—even in the face of the most daunting physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges.

Courses and Campus-wide Integration

I plan to integrate the skills learned in this class into the two classes that I regularly teach that include a writing, my First Term Seminar and January term course mentioned above.

However, I am not scheduled to teach either of these classes in the 2014/2015 academic year. I have two specific projects where I will be directly implementing the skills developed within this course. I have been in conversation with Meghan Krause, the Director of the Wellbeing Center, and together we are planning a series of five workshops (currently we are focusing on students) where I will focus on a specific skill (pillar, guidepost) of resiliency. The five topics are:

1. Self-care, and compassion for self

2. Mindfulness (and compassionate listening)

3. Authenticity

4. Positivity / Happiness Research

5. The Role of Gratitude

I am also working with the T/D students who are living in the Peterson House next year to schedule a series of resiliency workshops. There is a wealth of research in the area of how writing can be used to increase the capacity for resiliency and to improve health. I am interested in diving more deeply into this research, and understanding the pedagogy of using writing exercises, and guided reflection on the writing to foster increase wellbeing. I specifically plan to use the Connor Davis Resiliency scale (developed at Duke University) in pre-testing and post-testing students involved in these two projects.

Timeline/ Plan for Work

May 30 – June 1st: Course work at Duke Integrative Medicine

June 1 – August 30, Develop specific lesson plans, including information to be shared, writing prompts, and post writing reflections and assessments for all five workshops. Fortunately, the training I am doing at Duke works specifically with what is generally called the Pennebaker Paradigm, which includes specific assessment instruments for evaluating changes (positive and negative) in individual assessment of wellbeing.

June 2015, Analyze and integrate information from assessment done of both workshop/ classes offered through the Wellbeing Center, and done within the Department of Theatre and Dance.

June – August 2015, Develop specific lesson plans, including information to be shared, writing prompts, and post writing reflections and assessments for incorporating this new pedagogy into way I teach my FTS, which I will then be teaching in the Fall of 2015.

Conclusion

I am incredibly energized by this new area of research and pedagogy. I have been very interested in the role of personal narrative, and how guided reflection can significantly impact student learning. However, I have mostly incorporated this work simply based on my reading and experience as a teacher. I am very interested in diving in the research behind this methodology.