



Royal Roads
UNIVERSITY

Examining the impact of the design of the learning experience on the mental health issues of students

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Dr. Frederic Fovet, Associate Professor, School of Education and Technology

Context

- Even though awareness around inclusive design and UDL is growing in higher education, often faculty still default back to deficit/ bio-medical thinking when confronted with the mental health issues of students in the classroom.
- There is a reticence to acknowledge the impact of bad design on the mental health issues of students, when in fact it is clear in the learner voice that MH issues are often exacerbated by design issue. Some MH issues are even outright created by bad design (stress, anxiety, depression, etc.)
- Even empathetic instructors often argue for withdrawal/ leave rather than examine what best practices are required to support the inclusion of these students

The central question examined by this study

- Study looks at three different perspectives on this issue and includes interviews with faculty, instructional designers, and accessibility services personnel.
- These are three stakeholder groups that have insight into this issue but:
 - What awareness do they have?
 - What blind spots do they fall victim to?
 - What resources do they use?
 - What design issues do they identify?
 - What solutions do they experiment with?

Some examples of the impact of bad design on the MH issues of students

- Participation requirements that are daunting
- Group work components that are hazily defined
- Arbitrary deadlines
- Over-focus on high stakes summative assessment
- Assessment not aligned with course objectives
- Reading lists that are not realistic
- LMS spaces that are chaotic and overwhelming
- Expectations that are ethnocentric in design

Key findings and recommendations

- Each of the stakeholder group has a partial understanding of the impact of the design of the learning experience on the mental health issues of students, but would benefit greatly from accessing the other two perspectives
- Silo mentality and institutional hierarchies make it impossible for accessibility services and instructional designers to contribute effectively to the reflection and to guide faculty.
- Accessibility services personnel and instructional designers perceive a regular exchange on this issue as crucial, but see such interactions currently as impossible in light of time/ resources constraints.
- All stakeholders identify a feeling of fear and hesitation when it comes to addressing MH issues, and a pressing need to normalize these discussions around design.
- Clear that MH issues discussed are not limited to students and that they affect all three stakeholder groups as well. Few support resources exist for employees.