



Improving students' well-being through cognitive reframing

With the help of the Missouri S&T's Student Well-Being, Kelly Tate and Matt Goldberg, both associate teaching professors in our department, have successfully designed a narrative writing component focused on cognitive reframing as part of their English 1120 syllabus. The unit has been taught every semester since Spring 2022.

In the winter of 2021-2022, Professor Tate was deeply concerned when she noticed that not only many of her own students but also those of her ETC colleague's seemed fatigued from the pandemic and had low energy levels. "I was filling out more UCARE forms than usual," she said, "and working to convince students to return to class when they struggled."

Thus, Tate began to seek out tools that her English 1120 students, many of whom are freshmen, could learn with ease and that would make them feel empowered and inspired as they negotiated the transition from high school to college. It was then that she came across cognitive reframing, a psychological technique.

Tate offers the following explanation of cognitive reframing: "We aren't neutral observers of our lives. We tell ourselves stories about our experiences, and when those stories are negative, we can become entrenched in counterproductive ways of viewing our lives and ourselves. Reframing asks us to pause before coming to conclusions about how to interpret events. For example, is this story about me being bad at math, or is it about needing to try out some peer tutoring sessions? I'm simplifying, but the idea is that reframing builds resilience, which we know is important in terms of student retention and navigating life in general."

Working with Student Well-Being, Tate explored how cognitive reframing could be combined with narrative writing to offer meaning and give students lifelong tools. She then joined forces with Professor Goldberg to design assignments for narrative writing with a cognitive reframing component, which he subsequently also included in his English 1120 unit. Whenever the narrative writing unit is being taught in Goldberg or Tate's class, Senior Well-Being Counselor Amber Johnston visits as a guest speaker to promote the cognitive reframing skills.



Professors Kelly Tate and Mathew Goldberg presented their curricular innovation at the UMSL-sponsored Focus on Teaching and Technology Conference in St. Louis in October 2023.

The unit not only supports the traditional learning outcomes for English 1120, but it also offers students skills to help them deal with difficult situations and stress they might be facing and will face one day. One thing Tate asks her students is, "What is the story you are telling yourself, and is there another story you should consider?"

Aside from writing narratives in this unit, the students engage in peer review workshops. The students offer constructive feedback to their peers on their writing. "I observed higher attendance and engagement after this unit," Tate said, "and the response from my students was resoundingly positive." The peer workshops sought to remind the students that they are not alone. Tate and

Goldberg are confident that the connections that the students have developed through these activities will last a long time.

“Some students will say that they don’t have anything to write about,” Goldberg said, “and I always explain that that isn’t true.” He takes time to work with these students to help them identify those moments when they experienced challenges such as starting college, moving, or receiving a less-than-perfect grade, and this approach has worked all the times he tried it.

Commenting on the assignment, one student said, “[The assignment] was a good mental check. It gave me reassurance that I can do a lot more than I think I’m capable of at times. It will help me in my future because no matter what I will come across, I know that I can overcome it. I’m glad I had the opportunity to write this narrative and reflect on what I overcame.” Other students were happy they found narrative writing to be interesting and were glad that the assignments went beyond getting grades; they gained something to use in their journey through life.

Tate and Goldberg emphasize that, right at the start of the unit, students are encouraged to explore past experiences but not to explore trauma. If a student submits an essay expressing a matter of concern, the student is directed to Student Well-Being for help.

For her work on this project, Tate won a CASE Innovative Teaching Award for Spring 2022. Additionally, both Tate and Goldberg presented their curricular innovation at Missouri S&T’s Innovation in Teaching and Learning Conference in March 2023, and again at University of Missouri-Saint Louis’s Focus on Teaching and Technology Conference in October 2023.

