

(Re-)Discovering the treasure within – The contribution of a Design Your Life Module to Undergraduate Education

Tony Hall¹, Michelle Millar², Connie O' Regan²

¹School of Education, University of Galway, Ireland, ²UNESCO Child and Family Centre, School of Political Science and Sociology, University of Galway, Ireland.

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Abstract

This paper presents a description of a Design Your Life (DYL) module delivered to a multi-disciplinary group of undergraduate students. This approach as developed in Stanford University uses principles of Design Thinking to support students to consider their own agency and development pathways as they journey through university and beyond. The implementation of this programme is underpinned by an active evaluation strategy. As part of which, three focus groups were conducted with 15 students who had participated in the module over the past three semesters. This paper presents an analysis of student feedback on their participation, locating this feedback in the context of an overarching theory of student engagement. In so doing, this paper seeks to contribute to how these approaches can support students in their journey as active learners and, by building their resilience and self-efficacy, facilitate their discovery of the treasure within.

Keywords: Design your Life; Psychological Capital; Resilience, Adaptability, Design Thinking

1. Introduction

According to Delors (1996), “the treasure is learning itself, that remarkable asset possessed by every human and every culture which needs to be tilled and used wisely. Knowledge and minds are not commodities, not just 'human resources' to be developed, exploited and then cast aside, but treasures to be cultivated to improve the quality of life of both individuals and societies” (p.188). This paper describes the contribution a Design Your Life (DYL) module can make in supporting undergraduate students to undertake a journey of self-discovery and a lifetime commitment to ongoing learning and development. DYL forms part of a larger programme at the University of Galway, Designing Futures (DF), which focuses on preparing students for the world of work and for life in general, both at university and beyond graduation.

Designing Futures represents a transformational educational initiative, changing fundamentally learning and teaching across the university – for both students and faculty. The innovative features of DF include research-led teaching (vertically integrated projects (VIPs); cross- and multi-disciplinary learning (transdisciplinary teaching modules (TDMs); a bespoke, entrepreneurial space on campus, IdeasLab; and partnership with enterprise and industry, both in the design and delivery of the DF programme. The project team has located the various project initiatives within the student engagement literature and specifically in this paper we focus on psychological capital. Tomlinson (2017) defines psychological capital as “a potentially significant form of capital as it is based on the psychological resources which enable graduates to adapt and respond proactively to the inevitable career challenges” (p.347). He explains that there are number of elements to psychological capital "one of which is problem-focused coping towards developing proactive strategies in the face of challenge, mainly in the form of learning from experience” (Tomlinson, 2017, p.347). He argues that there is an onus on those of us working in higher education to “establish the importance of resilience and ways of proactively managing what are likely to be less linear and stable pathways during early careers and beyond” (Tomlinson, 2017, p.348).

The DYL methodology at University of Galway is based on the Life Design approach developed by Burnett and Evans (2016), originators of the Stanford Design Your Life/Life Design programme, which offers students access to a series of tools and templates designed to help them move from “dysfunctional beliefs” to “reframing” with a “bias to action” as a methodology to systematically address their career and life decision-making (Burnett and Evans, 2016). Life Design is growing in popularity in higher education internationally, particularly as an approach to supporting learners’ life and career development. Three main theoretical frameworks underpin the approach, namely Design Thinking (Brown, 2008), Emergent Adulthood (Arnett, 2015) and Self Authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This paper provides an overview of student feedback on their participation and signposts potential impacts on their psychological capital and autonomy.

2. Methods

The Designing Futures team have introduced the first University of Galway in-curriculum Design your Life (DYL) module; this is the first time the DYL approach has been taught for-credit in an Irish university. Developed and delivered jointly by the Student Success Coaching Team and the Designing Futures’ Director of Educational Design Research, this 5 ECTS module utilizes the design tools and templates developed in the Stanford Life Design Lab. The delivery of Life Design is also characterized by a novel and alternative approach to higher education, the module is supported by a wider student success coaching (SSC) programme, wherein students can avail of one-to-one and group coaching. Module teaching is also done in teams (there are five lecturers jointly teaching DYL at University of Galway, with individual and pairs of

lecturers alternating each week), which brings a rich diversity of perspectives to students' classroom experience. This follows the Stanford University approach where DYL is taught collaboratively. Each of the lecturers has also completed the Stanford Life Design Lab training and University of Galway, and Designing Futures is affiliated with the Stanford Life Design global research network. Furthermore, students engage in collaborative learning in each class, and the foundational educational approach underpinning the module is experiential and hands-on, with students participating in a variety of design thinking challenges and tasks, both individually and in groups, over the 12 weeks of the module.

2.1. Programme Outcomes

The team identified the following learning outcomes for the module, which support students in helping them to figure out how to get the most out of their university educational experience while best preparing them for the future world of work and their future lives:

- Identify and describe Design Your Life concepts, methods and tools that can be helpful in discerning the best professional and life path;
- Select and apply, as is personally best for them, Design Your Life tools for a given work and life decision;
- Critically and creatively, in an informed way, (using Design Your Life), discuss work and life decisions.

Throughout the 12-week, semester-long programme, the participants were introduced to a range of Life Design tools and approaches. Students are asked to conduct three sets of assigned work for this module. For assessment, they complete reflections on both the “Workview/Lifeview” tool and the “Odyssey” planning tool. The “Workview/Lifeview” helps learners to consider and define what values they hold important in terms of what work and life mean to them. The “Odyssey” helps learners to unpack what kind of future career and life they would like to lead by designing three alternative life scenarios: (1) the one they believe they currently live; (2) what if Life 1 was not possible and a Plan B was needed; and (3) what if there were no constraints. In addition, they develop and submit a digital story based on their experiences on the module. Adapting the Lambert and Hessler (2018) model developed at Berkeley StoryCenter, and initially introduced at University of Galway in teacher education (Thompson Long & Hall, 2018), the digital story is a 3–5-minute narrative, comprising first-person spoken text, images, and music. Through the technology-enhanced reflective medium of digital storytelling, students illustrate what they have learned from their engagement in the module and the DYL challenges and tasks over the 12 weeks. During its first three semesters, this module was attended by a total of 91 students, with 62 of these registered with the College of Science and Engineering, while 29 are registered with the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies. The gender profile of students participating is biased more towards female than male students (64 vs 27). The average age of students undertaking their undergraduate degree in the University of Galway is 21 years.

2.2. Module Feedback

The evaluation team gathered student feedback on their participation through both surveys and a focus group. This paper focuses on an analysis of student feedback based on three separate focus groups which were completed with students each semester at the end of the module. The number of participants in each focus group varied from 4 students in two of the groups and 7 students in the third group. The focus groups were conducted by a postdoctoral researcher who was independent of the module teaching team. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic approach by two researchers who were independent of the students' teaching team (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Ethical approval for this study was gained from the University of Galway Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number - 22.08.015)

3. Results

A total of 15 students provided feedback in this data set, there were 5 male students and 10 female students in the sample, with most students studying an undergraduate degree in the College of Science (n=13) and the remainder studying in the College of Arts, Social Science and Celtic Studies (n=2). In terms of demographic profile, the focus group profile is a good match for the overall group of students who have registered for this module over the semesters in question. The student's feedback highlighted that participation in the module helped in particular with developing their communication and teamwork skills, given the small group environment, collaborative learning and teaching approach and thus the need to communicate with one another during each session. They also reported that the work helped them with project management as they worked through the module assignments. Finally, they reported that the personal development focus on the module helped with their resilience and confidence about the future. Student feedback is summarized under three key thematic areas below with supporting quotes. Pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity.

3.1. Building awareness of their internal and external resources

The students explained how the Odyssey Planning exercise enabled them to reflect on where they want to 'be' in the future. For some the exercise made them think about what they actually want to do after graduation and for students like Blathnaid it has led her to determine what she doesn't want to do.

"It's probably like it pushed me to ... like what would I actually want to do. I'm doing science, ... Just looking at your Odyssey planning and looking at your work view and life view and stuff like that. I think it might be something like the media or television or something. It will have to be work in science as well, but like I don't want to work in a Lab, and I know that now." (Blathnaid)

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For others like Finn the plan empowered him to appreciate what his dream was and how to achieve it but more importantly he perceives that he has the capacity to achieve anything he wants.

“The Odyssey plan for me, seeing what my dream was and how achievable it is. It really puts that in perspective for me really, any kind of life path that I want to go down right now is actually really achievable for me and I have like the resources to achieve anything that I actually want to do”. (Finn)

For Jackson, Odyssey planning facilitated him to think about his future and gave him the tools to improve how he makes decisions about his life, what he likes and more importantly what he doesn't like.

“The reality of it, because in college, you are just doing college. And this is actually about life, you know that kind of way. ... It's kind of like a process of elimination because you realize what you don't like, and it points you in the direction of what you do like... The fact that you break it down, like current situation, decision to change. Stuff like that, that can really help. Like sometimes we just make decisions when we actually don't know where we are right now”. (Jackson)

3.2. Resilience

Having engaged in Odyssey Planning students realized that life circumstances can change and subsequently life plans change however, they still have agency to cope with the uncertainty of life. Dervla reflected that her involvement in the module supported her in realizing that she needs to work in order to achieve her goals in life, however, she is assured her resilience will ensure that she can cope with life's uncertainty:

“For me, there's two words that come to my mind, consistency, and resilience ... So, this module helped me to acknowledge that everything is on me. It's not gonna come and I have to work for what I want. But also, like resilience of there's so many ways to do what I want. And if it doesn't work one way it will work another way if I keep being consistent.” (Dervla)

3.3. Adaptability

The students discussed how Odyssey Planning helped them to understand that when things don't go the way we had hoped in life we still have options. For Orlagh prior to this she perceived that she had two options 'not failing college' and her 'life falling apart' or making it through college.

“Odyssey planning for me that was really helpful to making the three life pathways drawing them out and basically thinking of where I want to be in five years. What I could do if this didn't work out and what I would do if I had unlimited resources. It was really helpful because made

me realize, like I have other options as well. And it's not failing college and life falling apart or making it. It's not just those two.” (Orlagh)

Across each of these three themes, the students are demonstrating their active engagement with the module and in particular with their own agency and psychological capital. The evaluation team plan to conduct further focus groups with students over the coming semester. In addition, they will integrate these findings with the outcomes of pre- and post-survey which uses Lorenz et al.'s (2016) measure of psychological capital. In so doing it is hoped to further explore the impact of students' participation in Design Your Life.

4. Discussion

The deployment of this module within the University of Galway is part of the Designing Futures project (DF), a government funded initiative to enhance the employability of graduates by offering additional practical and creative teaching, learning and skills development alongside traditional degree studies. This student feedback illustrates that the strengths-based and design-informed orientation of the DYL module and in particular resources such as the Odyssey plan can have a particular mobilizing impact on their psychological capital, specifically their agency and resilience. As a foundational context for students' engagement with Designing Futures, DYL represents the crucial, personal development and formation element of the overall programme.

Alongside preparing graduates for the workplace and a fruitful career, higher education nonetheless remains fundamentally about educating active and critical citizens for the complex and challenging world of today (Hall et al., 2023). Therefore, DYL occupies a critical place within Designing Futures, in helping young people to figure out how they might navigate the future - in ways that are personally meaningful, while contributing positively to wider society. The idea of DYL is not to dictate how someone might live their life, nor denigrate the life they already live, but rather provide them with tools and systematic concepts and ideas for seeing how they can add to certain aspects of their life, as is, and plot the future that makes the most sense for them. Tomlinson (2017) argues that within higher education we need to plan for the inclusion of supports that can help our students to proactively manage uncertainty and complexity, nurturing the development of their confidence and resilience, especially as they embark on the first, formative steps of their careers and future lives.

Our findings point to the significant potential of Design Your Life to provide this kind of proactive support to students. DYL can help to build students' capacity to be adaptable and resilient, through fostering systematically their potential for positive self-authorship, founded on a clear and reflexive awareness of their capabilities and strengths.

5. Conclusion

In her digital story for the module assessment (November 2023) Naomi offered the following insights with respect to the DYL module, and two of the activities in particular: “The Heart and Head mapping and the Odyssey planning really helped me come to an important realization: “I had to reframe my life’s narrative.” All these years I kept trying to define myself based on my career choices and then losing myself every time things didn’t work out, instead of realizing that my strengths, passions and beliefs is what defines and gives purpose to my life regardless of what career pathway I choose or what life throws at me.” This quote illustrates how the DYL module can support students to develop deeper insight into themselves as lifelong learners, and by understanding their signature strengths, instill confidence and resilience in how they face the future. Furthermore, this student noted: “Doing the different Odyssey plans I saw repeating patterns. No matter how far-fetched the life plan was, “Mental and physical Wellbeing, Nature & Knowledge” were always at the core of all my decisions. And things started flow and make sense again”. This feedback shows how DYL can offer students concepts and tools so they can discover/rediscover the treasure within and move forward in their learning and life with a renewed sense of confidence and purpose. These findings form part of an ongoing evaluation of DF and the DYL module and further publications are in process detailing the range of initiatives over the lifecycle of the programme.

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