

Chapter 26

Creating an Emotionally Resilient Virtual and On-Campus Student Community at K-State through the University Life Café: A Case Study about Understanding the Users of a Socio-Technical Space

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ABSTRACT

A vibrant community of learners benefits from the well-being and health of all. The connectedness of today's students through social media presents a powerful opportunity for K-State, which built the University Life Café to strengthen the emotional health of K-State's students and to optimally prevent student suicides. This site provides opportunities for student intercommunications and interactivity; it offers access to counseling professionals. The site also provides relevant and original information on a variety of issues that affect students' lives: methods for handling stress, dealing with Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), maintaining healthy eating, strengthening social bonds and friendships, and problem-solving. The University Life Café team sponsors on-campus talks and events (including an annual art show). This team reaches out to traditional and non-traditional students and strives to create contents that speak to various demographic niches in the student population. The work of the University Life Café supports student retention by supporting learner well-being and self-efficacy through nonformal and informal learning outreaches. This chapter introduces the work of the University Life Café and the efforts made to understand who its users are in the first few years of the site's launch. This work shows the limits of the inferences that may be made about the site visitors and their possible needs and suggests more formal and informal channels for information may enhance this situation of limited information.

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INTRODUCTION

Universities and colleges often create and launch virtual communities in well-intentioned ways. Ethically and legally, they maintain a high level of responsibility for the well-being of their students. These are students who are both on-campus and those who are taking distance courses, from any place in the world. In real-space settings, on-campus security works hard to build systems, practices, and awarenesses that can keep students as reasonably safe as possible. To reach out to students who are present virtually on campus and for campus-based students (who often have high virtual presences), universities have also been moving to online spaces to meet students' emotional resilience needs.

This chapter explores the uses of a socio-technical space to promote emotional resilience at Kansas State University (K-State) through non-formal (not part of a formal class) and informal (incidental) learning. This also investigates the very real-world challenges of knowing who this virtual community of site users is by just studying the virtual space and other indirect pieces of information. The researcher found that there may be other as-yet unexplored channels to understand the evolving site user community and to evolve to meet their needs.

In the present age, the students who are coming through the university gates come with a variety of past experiences and different risk profiles for self-harm and suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students in the US, and it is a major public health concern around the world.

A Communal, Ecological Approach

Past paradigms of student care involved individual-focused paradigms that required early identification of possible self-harm (prevention) and crisis interventions; this approach also focused on post-

vention (after an event) strategies to help those who may have known a person who committed suicide or been indirectly affected. The nature of this challenge manifests across a variety of factors:

Episodes of suicidal thoughts and behaviors vary across many factors, including duration, intensity, frequency, associated mood states, consideration of methods, communication of distress, and help-seeking behaviors (Drum, Brownson, Denmark, & Smith, 2009, p. 214).

More recent endeavors involve a more communal approach that emphasizes the awareness of the larger community and emotional hardiness of both the individual and the larger community to the stressors that may lead to suicidal ideation and actions. Emotional resilience applies to both individuals and societies. Emotional resilience is a meta-ability (an executive function consisting of multiple abilities) of "self-control and discipline, the ability to use emotion well to cope with pressure and adversity, and balance feelings about oneself" for individuals (Butcher, et al., 1997; as cited in Selamat & Choudrie, 2004, p. 130). Socially, under an ecological paradigm, emotional resilience refers to "health despite adversity" (Ungar, 2004, p. 342). A constructivist approach considers "resilience":

as the outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse (Ungar, in press). Unlike ecological interpretations of resilience that are plagued by cultural hegemony, research that supports resilience as a social construction has found a nonsystemic, nonhierarchical relationship between risk and protective factors, describing the relationships between factors across global cultures and diverse social and political settings as chaotic, complex, relative, and contextual... (Ungar, 2004, p. 342).

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