

DESIGNING TO THRIVE – EXAMINING PERCEPTIONS AND EMBEDDING PRACTICE TO SUPPORT HUMAN FLOURISHING IN PRODUCT DESIGN STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

Human Flourishing - as defined by American psychologist, Martin Seligman – combines occupational and physical domains of human functioning such as meaning, purpose, personal growth and perceptions of happiness, joy, altruism and creativity [1]. ‘Proactive’ aspects of creating wellbeing and human flourishing are not often embedded directly into courses, rather being picked up ‘reactively’ in universities through Student Services, which although excellent, are disconnected from daily teaching. Creative burnout is unfortunately very common in the design profession, therefore understanding and taking ownership of personal flourishing is a critical skill for students and teaching team alike. However, do we all know what flourishing looks like for ourselves as educators, or how it manifests in our students? And do students understand the same about us as educators?

This paper examines two facets of human flourishing as it relates to engineering and product design education. Firstly, the results of a student-focused survey relating to subjective flourishing and the disconnect in its manifestation between student and educator. Secondly, how human flourishing and especially kindness - a key facet to support flourishing - can be embedded as an overarching framework within a module to create a greater depth of understanding of a design problem, and ultimately, of student (and client) flourishing needs. How can we teach, and design to thrive as individuals and a collective, not just survive?

Keywords: Human flourishing, positive psychology, pedagogy, product design, engineering

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of wellbeing in scientific literature has changed considerably in the last thirty years – prior to the late 1990’s, there was a distinct focus on negative elements such as distress, mental illness, hardship and trauma [2]. Wellbeing is now understood as a multidimensional concept involving fitness in intellectual, social, psychological, financial, spiritual, occupational and physical domains of human functioning flourishing, such as meaning, purpose, personal growth and perceptions of happiness, joy, altruism and creativity [1, 3]

The development of Positive Psychology builds on the fields of earlier humanistic psychology – such as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which dictates that a number of fundamental elements (physiological needs, safety, social and self-esteem) need to be established before someone can reach the top of the pyramid – that of growth and self-actualisation [4]. It has been argued that ‘self-actualisation’- the top of the Maslow Pyramid, could be very much the same as everyday creativity – or at the very least that one can help facilitate the other [5]. Rogers (1952) also commented that creativity is about the tendency to actualise oneself [6]. This in theory could be highly beneficial to those teaching, and on, creative courses such as product design and engineering, but all steps before that of self-actualisation would need to be established to provide a solid foundation for creativity.

Positive Psychology also considers the wider application of wellbeing to organisations and communities [7]. Three pillars of Positive Psychology have been suggested; Positive Subjective Experiences (happiness, fulfilment, joy, satisfaction, flow, optimism), Positive individual traits (character, courage, talents, interpersonal competence) and Positive Institutions (families, schools, organisations and societies) [8]. This makes wellbeing an essential component to study and develop in educational settings, as the wellbeing of an individual will affect the wider community and vice versa. There are many

elements across each of the Pillars that can be developed and supported in higher education to enable the individual – both student and educator alike - to ‘flourish’ and increase their personal, and professional wellbeing – including fulfilment, optimism and interpersonal interactions. Ensuring that educators / lecturers *and* students are not only surviving, but flourishing in their roles ensures that both the individual and the entire organisational environment can perform optimally [9, 10]

Over the last decade, the university sector has experienced significant and wide-ranging change [11]. In a recent report from Morrish (2019) involving 59 institutions in the UK from 2009 – 2016, rising stress levels, occupational health referrals and counselling visits were found, along with declining levels of mental health and wellbeing among university lecturers [12].

Student wellbeing is also of high concern, with students reporting increasing levels of psychological distress and demands, likely exacerbated as a result of the CV-19 pandemic [13, 14]. Whilst student wellbeing is in general decline, reports have stated how the perceived difficulty and stress on an engineering-based degree can cause significant declines in mental health [16].

Academic staff also refer to the practical and emotional demands on their workload and wellbeing, created by the responsibility for supporting students - especially as student wellbeing in educational frameworks has also been suggested by Kahu, Nelson and Picton to be ‘at the heart’ of an interface between their emotional, cognitive and behavioural connections to their study [15, 17]. But the pressure of balancing the needs of students with other demands and expectations of a lecturer’s role is also present, and concerning it is reported that often pastoral support given to students is not valued or recognised institutionally [15]. Staff reported that these challenges were compounded, as student wellbeing was expected to be prioritised over and above lecturer wellbeing - despite lecturer wellbeing being associated with being better mentally, emotionally and practically equipped to respond to student needs [15].

This bi-directional relationship between student and lecturer wellbeing is critical to not only understand but to positively foster to create a flourishing university environment. It was with this in mind that the following interventions were conducted at the University of Sussex in the academic years of 2023-2024, 2024-2025 and 2025-2026.

2 FLOURISHING – EXAMINING PERCEPTION DIFFERENCES

Wellbeing, as described above, has a multitude of facets which combine to give each individual a subjective overview and understanding of their current position. As some of the facets are situational or out of the control of the individual, there is also the issue that subjective wellbeing can change very suddenly, for example, with a looming deadline, an illness, or an argument with another. However, the concept of ‘flourishing’ as described by Seligman helps an individual to establish a general understanding of their average position in sectors of ‘PERMA’ - Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments [10,18]. The online PERMA digital profiler can help individuals to ‘score’ their subjective wellbeing accurately – high scores across the 5 pillars show ‘flourishing’, middle scores show ‘surviving’, whilst low scores demonstrate ‘languishing’ [19]. Even without using the profiler though, we can reflect on the pillars and determine where we likely sit on the languishing/surviving/flourishing scale, which was demonstrated in the open ‘flourishing’ study with students and lecturers below. Subjective wellbeing is of course, personal, but with only an outline of the PERMA framework, could students clearly articulate what ‘flourishing’ looked like for them?

2.1 The student surveys

An anonymous survey was sent out to all undergraduate students from the School of Engineering and Informatics by two student volunteers in Spring 2024 with the following prompt: “Humans can flourish in many different ways; emotionally, mentally, spiritually, physically and socially, with each area being both separate and completely interlinked. We would like to explore what flourishing means to you, as a student here at Sussex. **In which ways would you define and recognise flourishing in yourselves?**” The survey was completed by 47 students. Given the nature of the open question, the responses varied in detail with some students expressing multiple ways of flourishing, which was a key part of the study – to allow respondents to define the term for themselves. Perception of definition was being also being explored. All responses were considered, totalling 71 entries and key words/phrases were interpreted from the answers.

It was perhaps not surprising that the most common response by students to the open question was ‘good grades’, or variants of this phrase (10 out of 42 respondents), followed by ‘achievement / fulfilment’ or

variants of this phrase (8 out of 42 respondents) - with most respondents indicating achievement of personal goals being a key measure of their own flourishing. But since these are personal, and not always communicated to the lecturers, there could be difference in its interpretation and integration into the teaching and learning environment. Looking at the other top answers across respondents, some are intrinsically embedded in the teaching and learning set-up, such as 'learning new things' (5 respondents) and providing 'guidance/feedback' (4 respondents). Others might not always be integrated into teaching and learning activities, such as building 'confidence' (3 respondents) and being 'creative' (3 respondents). One may argue that other similar responses could have been grouped together thus demonstrating a higher importance via a higher count, e.g. 'study-life balance' and 'mental-physical wellbeing'. If merged, there would indeed be an indication of higher importance within the student community.

After gathering the information on themselves, we also wanted to know if the students could identify 'flourishing' in others – so a second question was asked: **“In which ways would you define and recognise flourishing in your lecturers?”**

The highest responses include key words/phrases such as 'passion', 'understanding', and 'engaging' (12 combined responses) relating mostly to the delivery of lecture content. The respondents also mentioned multiple inter-personal skills such as 'friendly', 'enthusiasm', and 'approachable' (4 combined responses). While there were also multiple responses that included variants of 'knowledge' and 'understanding' of the topics, it is no surprise that the respondents emphasised the soft skills in their lecturers as ways of demonstrating that they are flourishing in their lecturing roles. What was clear however, was how students saw their lecturers as 'lecturers' – and measured their 'flourishing' mostly against this identity/ job role alone.

2.2 The staff surveys

In January 2024, the authors ran a session at the University of Sussex Teaching and Learning Conference entitled 'Human Flourishing', which introduced the concepts of Seligman and asked the staff the same first question given to the students – **“In which ways would you define and recognise flourishing in yourselves?”** These responses were captured live, and anonymously on a Padlet board shown on the main screen. Responses included “feeling my work has impact”, “feeling part of a community”, “supporting others to flourish”, “learning new things”, “having a work/life balance”, “finding meaningfulness”, “being compassionate with myself” ... many similar themes were shown.

The responses from the students to how they saw flourishing in their lecturers (as discussed above) were then shown on screen. Whilst there is an overlap between 'passion / understanding / engagement' from the student's perspective and 'supporting others to flourish' from the lecturer's perspective, the general disconnect between subjective flourishing (as an individual human) and observed flourishing (students saw only the 'lecturer') was obvious, and quite shocking to those in attendance.

Similarly, the second question was asked to those in the room - **“In which ways would you define and recognise flourishing in your students?”** Again, the responses were captured live, anonymously and on screen via Padlet. Responses included “engagement”, “growth in confidence”, “building communities of learning”, “self-motivation”, “excitement”, “trying their best”, “helping peers”, “reflecting”, “being curious” and “being independent”. Once more, the results from how students saw flourishing in themselves (as above) were then displayed on screen – again, with a very clear disconnect between subjective flourishing and observed flourishing. The top answer from how the students see flourishing in themselves of 'good grades' was not mentioned once in the 60 responses from the teaching and lecturing staff in attendance.

These disconnects were then discussed as a group – ultimately leading to a collective agreement that we would not be able to develop university-wide flourishing unless there was a clear, and common language and understanding of how that actually manifested to ourselves and in others. If we were not talking the same language, we would never be able to succeed.

2.3 Forming a bi-directional link – embedding 'flourishing' in a taught design module

One way to build a common language between students and lecturers was trialled in the module 'Thinking Big – the 5 Senses' which features a multi-layered, open brief. Around 30 students were asked to create a brand / sector relevant product that enhances a sensory interaction, working specifically with one of six pre-selected brands and in response to the social landscape of the CV-19 pandemic. In 2024, another layer was added – student designers were asked to design a product that also 'enhanced the

measurable subjective wellbeing of the user, specifically within the framework of human flourishing'. A one-hour lecture/workshop on Seligman's flourishing and PERMA was given to the designers, focusing initially on the concepts of subjective wellbeing (i.e. how do you recognise flourishing in yourself?). After short discussions in class, the results and disparity between the previously surveyed student's subjective flourishing and lecturer observed perceptions of student flourishing were displayed on screen. Once more, the disparity between responses was discussed.

This module however, required the students to actually understand how flourishing manifested in their specific target markets - and required them to embed physical elements into their design that could be shown to increase measurable perceptions of subjective wellbeing using the PERMA framework, e.g. self-empowerment through personalised but community embedded exercise. By deepening their empathic understanding of flourishing in others through the design process, students reported that their awareness of how to see flourishing in real-life (and in others) had been sharpened, along with a deepened sense of how wellbeing could be developed for users of products. Each final product proposal was mapped by each group onto the PERMA framework to showcase understanding of which pillars were their focus, and how they could (in theory) be tested for effectiveness. This project was rerun in Spring 2025 and Spring 2026 with similar results – helping to bridge the language / observation / understanding gap of flourishing seen above.

3 KINDNESS AS A PRACTICE FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT FLOURISHING

'Kindness' is a key aspect of how flourishing can be manifested, but using kindness as an overarching constraint on design projects also gives deeper insight into the myriad problems that designers face. Applying the word 'kindness' to all project questions (and subsequent decisions) allows scope to improve enthusiasm, well-being/flourishing, empathy, altruism and meaningfulness in the designers themselves as well as with target users. Each enquiry in the research and development stage can be reframed to include 'kindness' as a lens. Such a framework simplifies some decision making on the basis of something being either 'kind or unkind' (as defined and measured below).

The following framework was used with a second-year class of 32 students in the Design for Industry module at University of Sussex. Students were encouraged to use the 'Kindness Framework' as a founding set of constraints for two industry set design briefs during the academic year of 2024-25 (again rerun in 2025-2026 with a cohort of 30 students).

3.1 The Kindness Framework

The Kindness Framework, (as developed by co-author G. Ellis) can be split into different sectors. Firstly, we can look at kindness focussed on the designer themselves, e.g. stress levels inside /outside the studio, natural pace of working, organisation skills, planning, expectations, feedback, communication and general wellbeing. If these elements are systematically understood by the designer, structured and built into the timeline of a project then we consistently see higher behavioural and emotional stability over an individual that ignored them. This is particularly true of student designers at times of high stress and looming deadlines. For example, 'am I being kind to myself by working until 3am? Or would it be kinder to myself to go to sleep at midnight and wake a little earlier?'. Or 'am I being kind to myself with my planned workload, or should I allow myself more time to complete tasks?'

Second is kindness to all other users, through the lens of empathy. This is already an academic stalwart that is highly researched, studied and practiced. Nevertheless, it was observed throughout the module in question (and comparing it to previous student project approaches) a slight language change by prefixing 'kindness' encouraged a more considered bias to disciplines like Human Centred Design, ergonomics, haptics, readability and comprehension, usability. This second sector also includes collaborators - we should also grant kindness to all those involved in the making real of any design - the engineers, fabricators, testers and investors for example. For example, 'how is the project presented? With clarity and precision? Without ambiguity and empathy for specialisms and common languages? Am I being kind to all to ensure that can work together most effectively?'

Lastly, the Kindness Framework considers the impact design has on the Earth, endeavouring to reduce the harm we do in any form. By employing 'kindness', decisions can be vetoed on whether they meet whatever performance / environmental criteria is set by the brief or from research (such as repair, recycling, reuse, producer responsibility). This has been demonstrated in practice by companies such as Patagonia stating in 2022 that the 'Earth is our only stakeholder' for decision making. For example, 'is

this the kindest material choice for the planet? Is it exploiting the Earth in any way, or is it working regeneratively?’

This trial of the Kindness Framework was shown to positively help students with establishing clear priorities across each sector – initially, what is the Kindness priority for themselves? How can they ensure they are supporting their own wellbeing through kind decisions? Secondly, how can they apply kindness in the eyes of empathy and compassion, and lastly, is this kind to the Earth? Results from this initial embedding showed a lower number of students self-identifying as being overwhelmed (sector 1) when compared to previous cohorts, along with highly empathic project results (sector 2) and a class-wide high consideration of environmental issues relating to their project proposals (sector 3).

4 CONCLUSIONS

It is clear, and deeply concerning that subjective wellbeing continues to decline in both students and educators, and whilst the authors acknowledge that a multitude of external / uncontrollable elements (such as financial strains, job insecurities, personal life) contribute highly to the wellbeing of an individual, there are multiple avenues that can be explored to increase positive aspects within the university landscape. Ensuring the same language is used between parties is key, along with empathic understanding of the ‘human’ and not just the ‘role’ they play. The decoupling of grades from the student’s perception of ‘success’ would undoubtedly allow them to see personal flourishing in a wider respect, and in a similar way to how lecturers view ‘student flourishing’, e.g. skill development, creativity, exploration etc. With a traditional grades-based system however, this is difficult to achieve.

What is essential is the embedding and exploration of wellbeing and flourishing concepts within courses themselves and not seeing the subject of languishing as an issue to be dealt with reactively by an already overloaded Student Support after a student’s wellbeing has declined.

These interventions have shown how proactively teaching YR2 student designers to apply the concepts of positive psychology / Kindness Framework to themselves and their design work builds a foundation onto which the more complex PERMA framework can be applied in YR3. Further study would be needed to explore how the introduction of wellbeing and flourishing concepts to YR1 students could perhaps further affect their university experience and work in a positive way. What has been already shown however is how the tools and definitions of kindness and flourishing creates more resilient student designers with a wider number of deeper, richer, more empathic work (when compared to previous, prior intervention year projects) – and due to the bi-directional influence on subjective wellbeing, allows both student and educator alike, to thrive.

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