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Note

It Takes a Community to Educate Resilient Changemakers: Building Resilience through Community-Driven Education and Experiential Learning

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Abstract

The educational landscape is evolving rapidly, with societal and technological challenges increasing the demand for resilient and adaptable students. This paper explores how the *Global Project and Change Management* (GPCM) honors program at Windesheim University integrates resilience-building into its curriculum through the Resiliency Labs. These labs leverage experiential learning and the Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework, combined with elements of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) —autonomy, competence, and relatedness—to foster intrinsic motivation and personal growth. By embedding both the IDGs and SDT principles into educational practices, we equip students with academic knowledge and the resilience needed to navigate complex global challenges.

Keywords: Resilience; Action, Experiential Learning, Inner Development Goals, Self Determination Theory

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Introduction

With 21st-century challenges, from climate change to technological advancements, it is crucial to nurture resilient, adaptive students. The honors bachelor program Global Project and Change Management (GPCM) at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences addresses this need by combining academic excellence with personal growth and social engagement. Central to the program is the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), equipping students with both the knowledge and self-awareness required to make a positive societal impact.

Resilience lies at the core of this educational journey, particularly through the Resiliency Labs. These labs provide first- and second-year students with an immersive, community-driven environment to prepare for academic, social, environmental, and economic challenges in a rapidly changing world. By embedding the IDGs and the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)—which emphasize autonomy, competence, and relatedness as drivers of intrinsic growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000)—the program nurtures both academic expertise and personal growth as essential foundations for meaningful societal contribution. In this way, the program reflects the essence of “It Takes a Village to Educate Resilient Students,” (co)creating a strong community that empowers students to thrive as changemakers.

Resilience is Rooted in Community: Integrating Resiliency Labs into the GPCM Curriculum

In 2022, the Resiliency Labs became a cornerstone of the Global Project and Change Management (GPCM) curriculum. Built around the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) framework, these labs were the outcome of a key question posed during 2021 action research: “How can we embed resilience into our curriculum?” This question became especially relevant as students faced growing academic and personal pressures, compounded by the mental health challenges highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the action research, one of the students remarked, “Finally, someone is asking us how education should look to support our mental health. It’s strange that we, as experts by experience, are not involved in this.” Also, from the perspective of the student counselors and lecturers, it became clear that an exclusively individual approach was not sufficient to support students in addressing their challenges. The complexity of the issues students were facing called for a broader, more collective, and preventive approach. This realization laid the foundation for the creation of the Resiliency Labs, developed collaboratively with students, lecturers, and student counselors as a series of experiential workshops aimed at enhancing both individual and collective resilience.

Following a successful pilot phase, the Resiliency Labs were integrated into the new curriculum, accompanied by the establishment of the Me-Team. This multidisciplinary team consists of two to three student assistants from different academic years, two student counselors, two lecturers (one serving as team coordinator), and an action researcher responsible for advancing the initiative and expanding its reach within and beyond Windesheim. The Me-Team is not only responsible for the Resiliency Labs but also for shaping the entire curriculum we call the Me-journey, which runs throughout the 4-year curriculum (we also have a World and Professional-journey). Key pillars of the Me-journey include community building, personal leadership, peer coaching, and reflective practice.

Working closely together, they ensure the program aligns with student needs, leverages diverse expertise, and promotes a vision of embedding well-being in our curriculum that could be beneficial for other universities and universities of applied sciences as well. By embedding Resiliency Labs into the GPCM curriculum, Windesheim University creates a “village” where students not only gain the tools to navigate today’s complex challenges but also develop the resilience to thrive as changemakers in a fast-evolving global context. This innovative approach demonstrates that resilience truly is rooted in community.

Building Resilience Together: The Transformative Power of Community Learning

Resilience, as defined in this program, refers to “the capacity of students to effectively navigate and adapt to academic and personal challenges, strengthened by a supportive community and a profound sense of belonging, which together enhance their well-being and academic performance.” This aligns with Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) assertion that fulfilling the need for social connections reduces emotional stress and improves cognitive functioning, which in turn enhances motivation, well-being, and academic success.

It also aligns with the research of Dopmeijer and colleagues (2021, 2023). They recommend that educational institutions implement strategies to strengthen students’ connections with their peers and the academic community, as a strong sense of belonging has been linked to improved mental health and academic performance. Additionally, Dopmeijer advocates for the development and investment in study skills, mental health skills, and digital skills, enabling students to develop essential skills to cope with academic pressures and stress. By creating a supportive learning environment that prioritizes both social integration and resilience education, institutions can better support students in managing challenges and promoting overall well-being.

In the Resiliency Labs, we create a supportive learning environment as follows: we mix first and second-year students in the Resiliency Labs workshops so they can bond and support each other. The Resiliency Labs offer students a choice of workshops on topics ranging from sustainable fashion, art workshops, life skills, regenerative agriculture, kickboxing, choir, dance workshops, filmmaking for resilience, cold experience, mindfulness, and storytelling. The workshop topics are shaped by student feedback and have also emerged from the contributions of alumni, faculty members, and external experts eager to share their expertise and remain connected to our community. While the Resiliency Labs initially relied more heavily on external experts and lecturers, they are now predominantly led by alumni, sometimes in collaboration with lecturers.

There are other universities integrating resilience into their curricula, such as Leiden University’s interdisciplinary program on Social Resilience, Erasmus University’s “Resilience” program using the traffic light method, and the University of Twente’s Master Course in Resilience & Risk Management. While these programs focus on structured courses and psychological strategies, the Resiliency Labs distinguish themselves by emphasizing experiential learning and community-building.

Evolving Resilience: Insights and Growth from the Resiliency Labs

After the pilot in 2022, we began asking students for feedback on the Resiliency Labs through general surveys. By 2023, we adopted Mentimeter to collect more specific insights on how students experienced the Labs, the new understandings they developed about resilience, and their reflections through word clouds. We also invited students to share how these experiences connected to the Inner Development Goals.

The data gathered from these Mentimeters reveals a growing vocabulary and understanding of resilience. In the early stages of the Resiliency Labs, some students were unfamiliar with the term “resilience,” with comments like: “I’m way too busy studying to deal with resilience.” Over time, as students participated in the Labs and reflected in journals and peer

groups, their appreciation for the importance of resilience deepened. Comments from the Mentimeter included: “Resilience is about knowing your limits and honoring them,” “Resilience is broader than merely mental health,” “I’m more resilient when I express myself in a social circle,” “Resilience is also about teamwork,” and “If we work together and trust each other, we’re more resilient in challenging situations.”

We also sought feedback from workshop leaders, including alumni, lecturers from the GPCM community, faculty from other Windesheim programs, and external entrepreneurs. They consistently emphasized themes of student growth, skill-building, and the value of personal connections and community. While challenges such as initial resistance and communication barriers arose, the workshops succeeded in engaging and inspiring students through practical, creative, and collaborative learning methods.

Over the past few years, the Resiliency Labs have evolved through iterative practice, gradually refining their structure and content. However, to truly understand and maximize their impact, more structured research is needed to identify the underlying principles that make the Labs effective. By delving deeper into these principles, we can ensure that the Labs continue to foster resilience in students, adapt to their evolving needs, and serve as a scalable and sustainable model for experiential and community-based learning. Such research will not only enhance the Labs themselves but also contribute valuable insights to the broader field of educational innovation and student well-being.

Practicing the Inner Development Goals

Experiential learning is fundamental to the Resiliency Labs, providing students with practical, hands-on learning that promotes both personal and collective resilience. In *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Kolb (1984) defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory, highlighting a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, allows students to engage deeply in activities while reflecting on their learning.

Together with students, we designed an analog journal, which plays a key role in helping students reflect on their experiences, using the Inner Development Goals as a guiding framework. The IDGs emphasize that inner personal growth is essential for societal change, a principle summarized in the motto “Inner development for outer growth.” This connection to the IDGs aligns with the GPCM program’s mission to prepare our students internally for their roles as global changemakers, equipping them with the personal qualities needed to engage effectively with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The journal supports Kolb’s experiential learning cycle by encouraging students to document their experiences (concrete experience) and reflect on these experiences (reflective observation). The IDG framework provides students with focal points for reflection. For example, after a workshop in kickboxing, students might use the journal to reflect on courage and perseverance from the dimension: Acting - enabling change (fig.1 Inner Development).

Application of Self-Determination Theory in the Resiliency Labs

The IDG framework provides students with a structure for reflecting on their personal growth and incorporates key elements of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness

(Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). These needs are operationalized within the Resiliency Labs as follows:

Autonomy: Students are empowered to choose their series of workshops, which fosters a sense of ownership and strengthens their intrinsic motivation. Some students play an active role in designing and refining the educational offerings, beginning with the initial pilot phase of the Resiliency Labs and continuing through ongoing adjustments. This involvement extends into the Me-Team, a multidisciplinary group of students, coaches, and faculty. Here, students contribute valuable insights, helping to shape the curriculum in a way that is responsive to student needs and fosters a collaborative and dynamic learning community.

Competence: The Resiliency Labs foster competence by providing students with hands-on, experiential learning opportunities that challenge them to develop new skills. Through workshops in areas like kickboxing, creative arts, and mindfulness, students gain practical abilities that go beyond theoretical knowledge. The Resiliency Labs workshops challenge students to build new skills, enhancing their sense of capability and self-confidence.

Relatedness: The Resiliency Labs place a strong emphasis on fostering relatedness through our community-driven approach, emphasizing student involvement in multiple aspects of the program. Some students play active roles in the Me-Team. Students in the Me-Team contribute directly to activities like immersive community-building days and shaping the content of the labs. The labs' community-driven approach fosters support networks among students from different year groups, alumni, and faculty, fulfilling the need for connection and promoting social development.

Conclusion

The Resiliency Labs within the GPCM program at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences underscore the vital role of community-driven education in nurturing resilience among students. Through experiential learning, collaborative design, and the integration of Inner Development Goals (IDGs) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the program creates a robust framework for developing both academic and personal resilience. By allowing students to select their workshops, engage in hands-on learning, and contribute to the ongoing development of the curriculum, they are empowered to take ownership of their educational journey, fostering intrinsic motivation. This, alongside a strong sense of community and relatedness through the Me-Team and student involvement, enables students to adapt and thrive in a fast-evolving global context. The Resiliency Labs not only equip students with essential skills for societal impact but also encourage them to grow as changemakers who are resilient in both their personal and professional lives. This holistic, community-based approach offers a promising model for other educational institutions to integrate resilience into their curricula and support students in their development as agents of change.

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