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International students creating comedy to foster well-being and connectedness: 'Are you joking?

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ABSTRACT

It is well established that international students attending higher education institutions in Australia and other parts of the world face challenges that can affect their state of well-being and connectedness. Higher education institutions have attempted to counter these issues by providing specifically designed programs with varying success. This study builds on some of the more successful programs that draw on the relationship between creativity and collaboration. The program aimed to foster international students' well-being by teaching them how to harness their creative potential and explore through stand-up comedy the funny side of life as international student in Australia. The analysis shows that the program positively enhanced well-being by fostering a sense of connectedness and by providing a space to take risks in a safe and supportive fashion. Data also indicated that the program contributed to the development of knowledge and skills transferrable to other academic and non-academic contexts.

Keywords: International students, connectedness, well-being, comedy, creativity, English as additional language, transcultural awareness development.

The number of international students seeking higher education opportunities in Australia has been steadily increasing since the Federal Government Higher

Education policy changes in the 1980s. The University of Melbourne's international student intake grew from 5% in 1975 to 36.6% by 2018, thus illustrating the dramatic shifts in the student population during this time (Rasmussen, 2018). Studies reveal international students face different challenges and issues in comparison to their local counterparts including cultural adjustment, language barriers and requirements, belonging, and isolation (Arkoudis et al., 2018; Baik, 2018; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman 2020; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer 2019). Moreover, English language proficiency for many international students is a potential barrier to adjusting to university life as it can affect well-being and lead to increased levels of anxiety (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Another common issue among international students is the feeling of isolation and disconnection from community, which too has been associated with mental health problems and effects on well-being (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer 2019; Browne et al., 2017).

Mental health issues are not unique to international students, they are faced by all university students in Australia. Prior to the pandemic, Brown et al. (2017) point out, mental health issues for all students have been 'flying under the radar of policy attention and leadership' in both higher education and mental health portfolios. Recent studies (e.g. Dingle et al., 2022; Mohamad & Manning, 2023) reiterate this ongoing issue and the need for crucial attention in the post-pandemic higher education context. As established, international students are burdened with distinct barriers and challenges; it is unsurprising that there is a call for universities to make international students' well-being and safety a priority, and to take more proactive steps to integrate these students into the host community and engage them socially (Biak, 2018, Mohamad & Manning, 2023).

This study reports on one such attempt to provide international students with a space to enhance their well-being by harnessing their creative potential and exploring the funny side of life as international students in an Australian context. As it is widely recognised that humour and laughter offer benefits to both physical and mental health, the project employed comedy as a strategy to foster friendships and build on language skills. This approach, however, has been seldom used in the context of international students in higher education. Addressing this gap, this paper describes how a comedy intervention contributed to a number of international students' sense of well-being and confidence in using their English language skills through a creative endeavour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The feeling of connectedness, and the related feeling of belonging, have long been identified as central to fostering well-being. In relation to international students, connectedness as a relational concept refers to the 'physical and virtual relationships international students hold with people, places, communities and organisations' and is 'closely related to their sense of belonging to the home and host country' (Tran & Gomes, 2017, p.7). Higher education institutes have long been setting up programs to help international students to counter the experiences of (dis)connectedness and foster a feeling of belonging in adjusting to university

life. Many of the programs include social support, especially through organised activities, which creates a space to initiate friendships as they search to locate their place in Australia (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Carter & Sallis, 2019). International students experience high levels of satisfaction when they connect and become part of the host society (Brown, 2009; Brown & Jones, 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Sawir et al., 2008). Tran & Gomes (2017, p. 7) suggest that international students, in seeking an educational experience outside their home country, are learning to traverse transnational boundaries and are seeking to aspire to belong in their host and home country simultaneously through establishing various points of 'connectedness'.

These students often connect with other international peers or 'same-culture' groups to navigate their place and belonging in the host society (Sawir et al., 2008; Gomes, 2020). This sense of belonging and connectedness can fluctuate depending on the quality and duration of time they spend interacting with diaspora and mainstream communities (Berry, 2005). It can also be highly contextual. In the specific context of international students studying in Australia, evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing challenges international students have long endured (Weng et al., 2021), a trend echoed in a recent review of the literature on international students' connectedness and sentiment of belonging (Mohamad & Manning, 2023).

Creativity and Well-Being

Many of the most successful programs for international students organised by higher education institutes are designed to engage students in creative activities. This is consistent with the understanding that creativity is a situated practice in that it is a process that primarily stems from the social context rather than from the internal cognitive processes of an individual found in many academic endeavours. In framing the creative process within collaborative activities, creativity has been linked to improvements to mental health and well-being. In a recent meta-analysis linking creativity to well-being, Acar et al. (2020) found that there is a relationship and that exhibiting one's creativity can positively enhance well-being. One such creative pursuit is theatre. Theatre can be viewed as being a form of 'distributed/distributive creativity', whereby artists collaborate on the devising and staging of a performance (DeZutter, 2016). Comedy performances are another well-established form of theatre, although interestingly and perhaps surprisingly, comedy as performance and art form has been seldom considered as one of the means to alleviate some of the challenges faced by international students in the tertiary sector.

Comedy and Well-Being

Whether it is partaking in or watching, comedy, as an art form has long been associated with the potential to influence a persons' mental health, well-being, and beyond. Many studies point to benefits of applying self-effacing humour or using humour to regulate emotions or to face challenges, manage stress

(Schneider et al., 2018; Amici, 2019; Curran et al., 2019; Twardzicki & Jones, 2017; Crawford & Caltabiano, 2011). Conversely, humour is not entirely benign, particularly when regarding self-deprecatory or self-defeating humour where the effect to one's mental health and well-being is inconclusive (Heintz & Ruch, 2018). For the most part, many scholars agree humour can have a protecting effect on both stress and anxiety (Abel, 2003; Frizt et al., 2017; Froehlich et al., 2021; Wanzer et al., 2009). Moreover, it is well-documented that comedy can be employed as a strategy to foster friendships and well-being, and that humour and laughter also offer benefits to mental health (Schneider et al. 2018; Amici, 2019; Curran et al., 2019; Twardzicki & Jones, 2017; Crawford & Caltabiano, 2011). Thus, we can reasonably conclude that comedy as a collaborative activity that fosters creativity can have beneficial effects on well-being in conjunction with providing an avenue for students, whether local or international, to make new and meaningful connections.

A particular sub-branch of comedy is that of stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedians and those who study their work (Double, 2013, 2017; Lincott, 2020) contend that stand-up has its own challenges and rewards compared to other forms of comedy. One challenge for many stand-up comedians is that they work alone, when writing their own jokes and subsequently performing them as a solo artist. However, it is reported that stand-up comedians can experience a feeling of elation when the comic material they have written for themselves receives a positive audience response. With particular significance to the aims of this study, Double (2017) notes that many stand-up comedians draw on their own life experiences as source material for their jokes as this technique engenders empathy from their audiences. Concomitantly, as Caslin and Davies (2022) found in their study of a stand-up comedy program for young people, it gave the comedians a platform to creatively express themselves and the stand-up nature of the comedy meant that they could express something unique about themselves to the audience via their on-stage persona. Of significance for our project, participants reported that the joy of making others laugh motivated them through a potentially difficult development process (2022). In sum, stand-up comedy programs potentially provide an innovative avenue to address some of the ongoing issues experienced by international students through the harnessing of their creative potential.

THE PROGRAM: AIMS, OBJECTIVE AND RATIONALE

The key objective of this project was to foster international student well-being by teaching students how to harness their creative potential and explore the funny side of life as international students in an Australian context.[1]

Through a series of four online workshops led by a professional comedian, international students from various faculties within the University of Melbourne

[1] As described in the next section below, the comedy workshops were adversely affected by Covid-19 and the program which was originally intended to be face-to-face had to be delivered online instead.

each developed a short comedy routine based on the theme of the life of an international student. These routines were then presented as a live online perform to an audience of family, friends, and others who had learnt of the event via social media. The stated aims of the project were:

- Foster international student well-being by showing [them] how to harness their creative potential and explore the funny side of life as international students in an Australian context.
- Gain an understanding into the ways collaborating to create and produce a comedy routine can foster well-being for undergraduate and postgraduate international students at the University of Melbourne.
- Explore cultural differences by working explicitly with the positive dimension of interruption, conflict, and tension.
- Promote well-being and a sense of belonging during covid[2]

The use of humour and the use of English language were construed in the design of the study, acting as a mediating space for students to reflect on the relationship between language, humour and identity, and the way in which these elements could be harnessed to create powerful narratives about the self. Participants took part in a series of four workshops delivered via Zoom (see below) where they shared stories and other artefacts based on their life as an international student at the University of Melbourne. Each workshop was built around developing knowledge and skills related to the writing and delivery of stand-up comedy. Participants were given the opportunity to share their favourite comedians with the group, test out jokes on each other in breakout groups, and experiment with different performance techniques within the confines of a Zoom screen. As the workshops proceeded, students began to develop a performance piece based on stories about themselves that they were comfortable to publicly share. The sharing was facilitated via a live online event with a worldwide audience.

The Study

Our study aimed to explore the extent to which and in what ways the international students' sense of well-being was impacted (or not) through these creative endeavours.[3] The project employed an Arts Based Research (ABR) approach (Sajnani et al., 2019), whereby an arts activity is researched during its development and presentation, and that the undertaking of the arts activity is seen as being a further act of research. A qualitative methods approach was employed

[2] This aim was subsequently added as a result of the pandemic.

[3] Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics committee of the University of Melbourne, ID number 2057690.1

to the data collection and analysis. Qualitative methods are typically used in education and the arts, including when the two fields coalesce in the one project/event (Tracy, 2019). Workshops were observed and, in accordance with the ABR approach, emergent findings and themes were fed back into the workshop series. Data included filmed recordings of workshops and the performance, transcriptions of workshops performance, and a post-performance reflection session, as well as transcriptions of participant interviews conducted one-year post-performance. This approach provided opportunities to gain insights from various factors, and capture changes and developments over time.

This paper reports on insights gained from one dimension of the research project: specifically describing how and to what extent comedy enhanced well-being from the point of view of participants. Over a period of time and relying on multiple sources, this study examines in detail the case of three students who volunteered to take part in all data collection points of the study while completing the program.

The project ran from August 2020 to October 2020 and the associated research project ran from the start date and throughout 2021. The timeline for the project was adversely affected by Covid-19. Indeed, the program took place at the start of semester 2, 2020 when the pandemic was at its peak. The state of Victoria, where the University is located, had been in 'Stage 3 Lock Down' for 43 consecutive days from late March to mid-May 2020, which meant that new international students had barely had the opportunity to experience campus life in semester 1 (March-June). The comedy program, which had been delayed in implementation due the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, was offered at the start of semester 2 which started on 25 July. By then, Victoria had entered what would be its longest confinement period with 111 consecutive days from July 9 until 27 October 2020. As a result, the comedy workshops which were originally intended to be face-to-face had to be delivered online.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-one international students enrolled at the University of Melbourne registered to participate in the program. Nineteen (61%) were based in Melbourne, 11 (35%) overseas and 1 in country Victoria. Six (19%) were enrolled in the undergraduate program and 25 were post-graduate students (80%). Eighteen (58%) were female and 13 male (42%).

Three students, two male and one female, participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews one year post the program's completion. The intention of interviewing the participants one year after the performance was to gauge in what ways involvement in the project may have had a longer-term effect on them and their university life, as well as ensure that students had the opportunity to reflect on this experience post-Covid restrictions. The three students came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds - two from different regions in the Asia Pacific

(Students A and C) and one from the Middle East (Student B). Interviews were conducted in English.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted online, and students were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of the program in enhancing their well-being. The interview duration was approximately one-hour. Data collected in an online questionnaire completed by students at the time of enrolment in the program (n=31) was also scrutinised with a specific focus on comments prompted by a question which asked participants to explain the reason they'd like to take part in the program in 100 words or less. The rationale for including this data in the study was to triangulate some of the findings by contrasting expectations of the whole cohort against the perceptions and insights of the three volunteer participants post-treatment one year later.

Data Analyses

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following an inductive approach, transcripts were read and coded independently by three researchers. The social worker within the research team specifically looked for elements linked with well-being in the data, whereas the other two researchers focused on emerging themes. Themes were compared and discussed with the team and a number of themes and sub-themes identified. Findings that emerged from the interview data were also compared with data collected from the online questionnaire. Results are presented and discussed in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the three interviewed students expressed strong positive affiliation towards comedy at the outset. Watching comedy was, for them, a means to relax (Student A), to lift their spirit after a busy day - or indeed during the pandemic - and release stress (Students A and C). Such findings are in line with what is otherwise known about the positive effect of comedy, and humour more broadly, to alleviate emotional stress and enhance well-being (e.g. Berk, 2001; Lefcourt et al., 1986; Jiang et al., 2020).

Additionally, three broad themes emerged out of the data: 1/ *comedy and risk-taking*, 2/ *comedy and connectedness* and 3/ *comedy as transferrable skills*. All three themes were also linked with well-being. In what follows, each theme is discussed in turn. The first sub-section examines the interface between risk-taking and well-being, the second and third sub-sections respectively focus on connectedness and transferability. Pedagogical implications as well as limitations are then presented in the conclusion.

Comedy, Risk-Taking and Well-Being

This section draws on the interview data to explore the link that interviewed students made between the comedy workshop, risk taking, and well-being.

Risk-taking is commonly defined as doing something when the outcome is uncertain (Kennison & Messer, 2019). The opportunity to take risks through the medium of stand-up comedy was a strong initial motivational factor for the three interviewees. Risk-taking was construed as "doing something new" (Student A), "testing myself" (Student B) or feeling both "very nervous" and "very warm" (Student C). In other words, students relished working with the positive tension of emotions that comedy classes afforded to push themselves into new territories. The thought of making themselves somewhat vulnerable by performing in front of a live audience and testing ideas in front of peers was positively envisaged as a means to cope with stress and break away from the daily routine. This echoes Kennison & Messer (2018) in the field of psychology who established a link between the use of humour and individuals who enjoy social risk-taking.

The welcome challenge to engage in a new activity continued past initial expectations and throughout the program despite the students feeling that activities were "quite difficult" (Student A), and that it was a "struggle to come up with jokes, to write out lines and prepare them and everything" (Student B). Besides the students' strong initial positive affiliation towards comedy, the supportive learning environment and informal scaffolding provided by the group seems to have been key in sustaining the form of social risk-taking that comedy implies and in sustaining the students' self-efficacy beliefs (Zimmerman et al., 1992) throughout the program. As Student A describes, "it was like a safe space. I knew even if no one laughed at my jokes, it wouldn't be the end of the world" and "I saw other people who were struggling as well and just working it out and then slowly I developed my ideas".

Peer validation during and post-program was also notably central to sustaining this positive sense of achievement and sentiment of self-worth, which in turn also fueled their well-being (Martin & Ford, 2018). This was explicitly articulated by Students A and B during the interview. They describe:

> getting such a positive feedback, in the Zoom chat, as well as the other people who were performing with me and then afterwards when we were on the call as well. I think that sort of boosted my confidence in myself in a sense that I could do this after all. […] To be able to express myself in that manner and to make other people laugh or just being creative that definitely helps me feel better about myself as well as improve my creativity (Student A).

> It just makes me smile when I look back at the performance and I still share the video clip of my five minutes of my performance with friends. And they tell me that you have the knack for being a standup comedy performer. [...] And after... The immediate effect was that I was

> super happy. I had a sense of achievement […] I was really high spirited for about a month (Student B).

Risk-taking was also envisaged from the perspective of the students' diverse cultural backgrounds and their use of English as second or additional language to make comedy in an unfamiliar cultural environment. As Student B describes:

> this is not my first language and I still have my concerns regarding being funny, the concept, the construct of being funny and telling something that is not only funny, but meaningful at the same time. Because something that is meaningful for me and understandable and tangible may not be tangible for other people (Student B).

Understanding humour has been reported to be the biggest challenge for L2 students with advanced proficiency levels because of the numerous cultural references and assumptions involved (Bell, 2009, 2017; Chen & Dewaele, 2019). Risk-taking was therefore compounded by the risk of not being funny to the students from other cultural background or being culturally inappropriate. However, it seems that the risk of negatively impacting self-esteem in front of their peers was offset by the genuine desire to *be* funny and to engage and understand the way people did humour in their host country.

Figure 1 below summarises the various dimensions of risk-taking as expressed by the students. It highlights the dynamic, multi-faceted and collective dimension of risk-taking with each component connecting and combining with one another to foster well-being (Ehrenberg, 2010). Well-being is conceptualised in the diagram by the shaded background as it is not located in any specific component but experienced dynamically when all of these conditions were met.

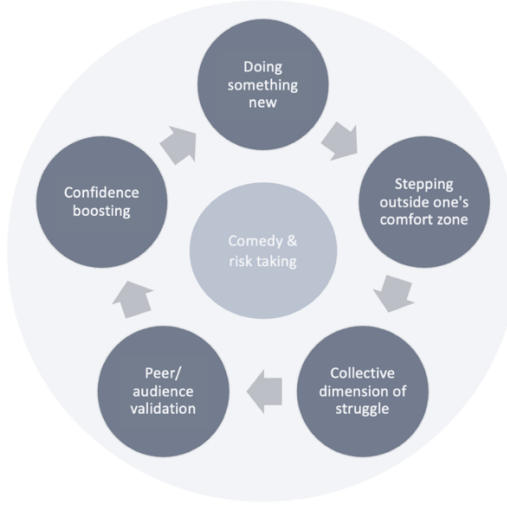

Figure 1 Comedy, Risk Taking and the Fostering of Well-Being

Comedy, Connectedness, Identity Construction & Well-Being

Connectedness, or lack of, was the second central theme for the three students. The relationship between connectedness and well-being is first discussed in light of the student interview and enrolment questionnaire. The dynamic interaction between connectedness, identity construction and self-representation is then examined to further unpack the kind of social connections that students aimed to develop, maintain, or strengthen through comedy in relation to 1/ their home country 2/ international peers and 3/ the host country. These are discussed in turn in the second part of this second sub-section.

Connectedness and Well-Being

In line with Weng et al. (2021), our data suggests that all three students felt deeply isolated and socially disconnected, a sentiment which was heightened by the unprecedented solitary condition they were subjected to. Social disconnection and the inability to make friends were the greatest source of distress for Students A and C. They state:

> I think I was feeling disconnected in many ways because it was obviously the second semester I had started university. In the first semester, it had all been online, hadn't really met anyone in person or made many friends (Student A).

> I really need some connections with the outer world , but actually to some extent, I don't know how to connect with others (Student C).

For Student B, high stress and anxiety levels for a prolonged duration of time led them to be "further and further away from [their] original self" suggesting that their well-being had been negatively impacted in important ways.

Shared purpose was a central element in creating and sustaining the sentiment of connection for the interviewed students. They welcomed the opportunity to connect with "similar minded people" (Student A), who "share the same interests" (Students B) and "work together towards specific goals" (Student C). This in turn boosted their sense of self and sense of belonging because they could feel "a part of something" (Student A). The social interaction that the program provided continued outside the workshop via a group chat students set up (Student A and C) and additional meetings to "work on our scripts together" before the final performance (Student B). This, in turn, expanded and sustained their sentiment of connectedness and shared purpose with the group over time.

The opportunity to make friends and "connect" was an aspiration shared by a third of the cohort at the time of enrolment, suggesting that meaningful interaction was a salient motivational factor for many to join the program. Such findings align with Weng et al. (2021) and Mohamed & Manning (2023) who highlight international students' yearning to belong and connect with fellow international students and the host community.

In many ways, the group was a temporary cluster and had, for these students, many of the attributes of what Lindkvist (2005) describes as collectivities of practice. These collectivities are temporary and established quickly with participants working collaboratively to achieve a common goal. Such collectivities typically rely on individual knowledge, agency, and goal-directed interaction. In relation to our context, the temporary social formation that was generated by the program promoted connectedness by attracting individuals with a shared appreciation of comedy and willingness to take risks. Mirroring the relations of risk-taking presented in Figure 1 above, students were enabled to make themselves vulnerable and create with the support of the other group members. This in turn facilitated cooperation and solidarity (McLachlan, 2022), while also creating a space to engage with other cultures: that of other international students and that of the host country via the program content and the training they received. Figure 2 below summarises the way in which connectedness and well-being were fostered through comedy. The shaded background in Figure 2 stands for comedy as it is through comedy that the students' interest and goal-directness were sustained throughout the program.

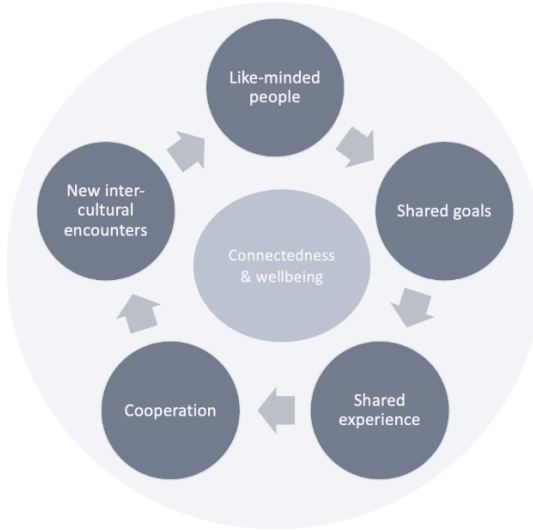

Figure 2 Connectedness and the Fostering of Well-Being through Comedy

Connectedness and Identity Construction: A Dynamic and Multidirectional Process

Importantly, data suggest that the sentiment of connectedness was multi directional and linked in complex ways with positive identity construction, which also fostered well-being. Interviews and questionnaire data unambiguously indicated that participants perceived the program as a means to maintain their

connection with their home communities as well as connect with participants from different backgrounds and engage with the host community through comedy.

The labelling of "home" and "host country/communities" and "international peers" in the three sub-sections below does not suggest that the transnational boundaries that students were learning to cross are to be understood as neatly bounded, static, and binary (Baker, 2016). It does, however, build on insights gained from the student interview data where attitudes and orientations towards the three groups were clearly marked. Each are discussed in turn.

Home country/communities: Strong affiliation towards the home country was apparent in Student B's quote (above), as they actively maintained the relevance of their performance by sharing the video of their skit with friends from their home country long after the program was over. The sharing of the video for Student B was therefore a (re)affirmation of their own identity as the "joker" among their peers back home and in return peer validation was a reaffirmation of group membership and belonging. From this perspective, comedy mediated through the video indexed "fun", "success" and possibly also "status" (partly indexed via the use of English in international education context) which in turn boosted Student B's sense of self positively.

Similarly, Student C used their performance to reconnect with a once close university friend from their home country, although unlike Student B, the primary objective was not to maintain a collective status or identity with a group of peers. Rather, it was a means to pay homage to that friend who introduced the student to comedy and to renew, continue, and extend their relationship in the future. Student C describes in rather powerful ways how the comedy program enabled the rekindling of their friendship and the sense of fulfillment derived from it:

> I haven't connected my university roommates for quite a long time, say one year and a half. And then because of my performance, I connected with her again after these years. […] it is her that introduced me about the comedy, so I really want to share with her […] I treasure my friendship with my roommate very much […] We kind of have different pathways, but after that we are get very close again (Student C).

International peers: Both Students A and C valued the cultural diversity of participants and intercultural exchange opportunities that the program afforded. This, in turn, sharpened their curiosity towards others, an attribute shown to be essential for successful study abroad as linked to 'openness, flexibility, ambiguity tolerance, lack of ethnocentrism, interest and discovery of the new' (Coleman, 2013, p. 39). For Student C, the connection with fellow international students was a highlight because they had little previous experience interacting with other cultures prior to the program. The student describes:

> It's really an interesting process to communicate with students from other backgrounds than China because I don't actually know many people from their backgrounds [...] so it's really exciting for me (Student C).

This sentiment was shared by Student A:

> I think the biggest thing with international students is that they're all from different backgrounds. So you really get to understand and see a perspective that's not yourself and something you might not have necessarily thought of before. […] they brought something different to the table, which made me believe the conversations or the jokes or the working out more interesting in the sense (Student A).

The intercultural awareness of Student A and C therefore grew in the process (Baker, 2016) which in turn led to personal fulfilment and satisfaction.

Host country/communities: To be able to get the jokes when "everybody else does" is a means to understand and engage with the host language and culture at a deeper level. It is well-known that humour acts as a sort of gatekeeper which includes or excludes participants based on their understanding of the joke (Ezrina et al., 2023). "Getting the joke" for either L1 and L2 speakers is therefore at once a means to perform in-group membership (Ezrina et al., 2023) and validate one's level of cultural and linguistic competencies. As a student described in the enrolment questionnaire:

> I went to the comedy show once in Melbourne but it was hard to fully understand because I came from a different background and culture. People next to me were laughing but I didn't quite understand it. I love comedy so I'd like to be part of this program to be able to enjoy the comedy show as I did in my own country.

The motivation to join the program for this participant stemmed from their first-hand interaction with local communities and the student's perceived inability to fully participate due to gaps in knowledge of the language and culture of the host community. Joining the program was therefore seen as an opportunity to move away from the periphery, culturally and linguistically, and gain a more complete level of fuller cultural access and membership in that community. In contrast, Student B, who had not yet had an opportunity to interact with the host community in person due to the pandemic, saw the program as an "advance organiser" that is, a way to gain insights into the language and culture of the host country prior to their travelling to it. In any case, both students saw comedy as preparation to participate in the host community by strengthening their knowledge of the language and culture.

Additionally, and at a more personal level, the program was also perceived as a means to rekindle with one's own "inner joker" that the switch to English and an unfamiliar cultural etiquette and environment prevented. As one participant described in the enrolment questionnaire:

> when I move to Australia, I start to cease producing any punchlines. Maybe this situation is attributable to cultural difference or language difficulties. Therefore, I want to learn more about how English speakers write their jokes.

The willingness to reconnect with one's funny side - that some felt had been lost "in translation" - is quite arresting and seems to be a critical dimension of

self-perception and identity construction that would deserve further scrutiny, as very few studies have examined the place of humour production (as opposed to reception) as a means to foster (and potentially boost) international students' sentiment of belonging, agency and connectedness.

For other students, the comparison of humour between the home and host country also acted as a point of connectedness. As Student C describes:

> Creating Comedy is more and more popular in China, so I wonder the different and similar between international environment and China (Student C).

Establishing various points of 'connectedness' (Tran & Gomes, 2017, p.7) to find ways to belong simultaneously in their home and host country or community can be conceptualised by way of a diagram (Figure 3) as follows.

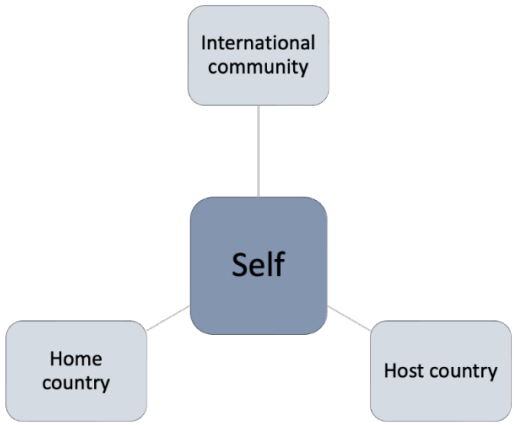

Figure 3 Points of "Connectedness"

On the "horizontal" plan of the triangle, are located the home and host countries which indicate the students' simultaneous desire to belong and connect with both spaces. This desire is mediated by the student's own intersubjectivity and may at times be in tension with one another. On the vertical axis is located the students' new lived experience as international students. At the junction of the three axes is the self, that is, the student's own intersubjectivity and orientation towards any one group as they learn to navigate through their new environment which, like a cursor, may slide up or down and left or right towards any of the three dimensions at any given point in time. As discussed, this conceptualisation should not be seen as rigid but rather as a fluid and sometimes transient phenomenon even if the students at the time of the interview clearly differentiated between all three spaces. Further investigation is required to explore the extent to which this perception was due to the very compartmentalised online lives they learned to inhabit during the pandemic or whether this perception was grounded in broader patterns of representations and lived experiences.

Comedy as Transferrable Skills

Finally, a salient third and last theme emerged out of the data. Data revealed that the program was also construed by the participants as an opportunity for self-betterment, the enhancement of public speaking skills and presentation of the self in professional and/or academic contexts. As students A and B describe:

> recently at work, when I had to introduce myself to my team, I thought like, Oh, how could I make this funny? How could I make it more engaging for everyone? And not just a simple slide show (Student A).

> I already knew that in order to communicate more effectively with people [...] you have to be concise. So there were some techniques, [...] about making jokes that I took away from the workshops, like being concise, being... like the punchline, the structure of the effective jokes [...] (Student B).

In other terms, the workshops helped participants develop greater awareness and sensitivity to their audience and its expectations which are central skills to possess in contemporary contexts of communication.

For Student C, humour was also perceived as an essential component of success and a central tool to problem-solving. They comment:

> I think people who are humorous are very charming and can deal with the difficulties in life in a positive mindset, so I really like them and I want to be one of them (Student C).

This instrumental and aspirational approach to comedy was also present in the student enrolment questionnaires but focused on the linguistic and cultural gaps these students felt they had in relation to the host community: "I need to know more about cultural background and that's the biggest reason i wanna join the program" commented one, while another one expressed their concern "about [their] English and lack of understanding of slangs" which was "why [they'd] like to participate this program".

These important insights suggest that humour and creativity can be harnessed in a range of ways and can potentially contribute to the more formal dimension of academic training in important and meaningful ways. Beyond well-being, the program enhanced the student'' intercultural awareness and empathy towards other ways to construe reality and their awareness of what effective public speaking entailed in Western contexts. The use of humour was also perceived as a confidence booster and a means to perform success. The link that some students spontaneously established between the betterment of their English-speaking skills and understanding of a particular register and popular culture also warrants further scrutiny.

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In sum, the analysis found that risk-taking was construed as a form of stress relief and a break from the daily routine which in turn enhanced well-being. The positive learning environment was also essential to scaffold the students' learning and sustain self-efficacy beliefs throughout the program, as was peer validation inside and outside the program acting as a formidable boost to their confidence and self-perception. The analysis also found that the program enhanced the students' sense of connectedness which was fostered in the group through shared purpose and a shared interest in comedy. Data also revealed that the students used the program and its outcome (a video) both as a means to maintain connection with their home communities and with their new international community and the host community.

The fact that the program unexpectedly took place during the pandemic constitutes an important limitation of this study as it is not possible to say with certainty that the benefits highlighted in this study would be transferrable face-to-face under normal (i.e., less stressful) conditions, providing a different experience. The small sample size of participants constitutes another important limitation. If the insights of the three interviewed students provided a rich exploration of the interface between comedy and well-being in the context of international education and revealed promising long-term impacts of the program, additional insights would be gained from interviewing a larger sample size in the future. Future studies should also focus on longer programs to gain further insights on the relationship between academic performance, the mastery of various register and style in English, and stand-up comedy.

Nonetheless, this study contributes an alternative approach to supporting international students. It points to a novel and prospective avenue that comedy workshops bring to sustain and enhance not only the well-being and sentiment of belonging of international students in their new and unfamiliar environment, but also potentially their academic education and training. In particular, the very promising findings of transferability of the performative skills developed while completing the program suggest that stand-up comedy could also contribute to the consolidation of international students' academic and professional communication skills, which constitute another innovative domain for further research that this study uncovered. Stand-up comedy is a field currently under-researched in the context of international student education and this study shows that it may be a fruitful avenue to enhance learner agency and connectedness, two key factors in the promotion of international students' well-being.

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