

A Novel Approach to Supporting Student Mental Health in the University Classroom with Therapy Dogs

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ABSTRACT

Therapy dogs visit nearly every university campus in Canada to support student mental health, but they rarely, if ever, visit during a class. We introduced therapy dogs to an undergraduate Sociology of Addictions course. Our findings offer insight on how therapy dogs can support student mental health in the classroom.

Keywords: therapy dog, mental health, university classroom, student support

RÉSUMÉ

Le Programme de zoothérapie canine est mis en œuvre dans presque chaque campus universitaire au Canada pour offrir un soutien psychologique aux étudiants, mais rarement, voire jamais, pendant les cours. Nous avons introduit le Programme de zoothérapie canine à un cours de premier cycle sur la sociologie.

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This research was made possible through the participation of St. John Ambulance Therapy Dogs Kisbey, Subie, and Anna-Belle.

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des dépendances. Nos résultats montrent comment la zoothérapie canine peut contribuer au soutien psychologique étudiant directement en salle de cours.

Mots clés : zoothérapie canine, santé mentale, salle de cours universitaire, soutien étudiant

BACKGROUND

Therapy dogs (TDs) are companion animals that enjoy visiting people in the community and are evaluated to do so. TDs visit on Canadian university campuses to offer informal mental health support to students, such as during examination periods or in student counselling sessions. Studies have shown that TD visits provide positive feelings of comfort, love, and support to university students, and can reduce their stress among other beneficial mental health outcomes (Dell et al., 2015).

While TDs are commonly situated in elementary and high school classrooms, they have yet to be formally integrated into the university classroom. This is a potential missed opportunity for uniquely supporting student mental health. We introduced three St. John Ambulance TDs to two sections of an undergraduate Sociology of Addictions course taught by one of the authors. A process evaluation was used to assess whether the TDs acted as a source of mental health support for students in the classroom. This may be especially relevant at this time of the Covid-19 pandemic as students may return to the classroom with increased mental health concerns (Patterson et al., 2021).

SETTING

The course instructor had been teaching the class since 2007, and at the time of the process evaluation, had been a St. John Ambulance TD handler for three years. Across both sections of the course, one of three TDs, Kisbey, Subie, or Anna-Belle, were present for approximately 65% of the classes. One section of the in-person class was held daily for 12 classes over a 3-week period from July to August 2016 (60 students) and the other was held weekly for 12 weeks from September to December 2016 (80 students). Class attrition was 10% for both sections. All students were made aware of the TDs' intended visit prior to the courses and students had the option to anonymously deny the visit; however, no students declined.

At the time of the visits, Kisbey was an energetic 7-year-old Boxer breed that encouraged people to engage with her by staring at and nudging them. Subie was an easygoing 5-year-old Boxer breed, and regularly leaned into people to be petted. Anna-Belle, also a low energy dog, was a 3-year-old Bulldog breed who regularly lifted her paw as an indication she wanted to be petted. Kisbey tended to roam the classroom and visit with students, Subie typically rested at the front of the classroom on a mat, and Anna-Belle often fell asleep on a table at the front of the classroom beside the instructor. All students had similar opportunities to approach the TDs to interact with them in the classroom, but this mainly occurred at the start, break, and end of class.

METHOD

Our process evaluation gathered feedback from the students and instructor. First, questionnaires were issued during the final five minutes of each class that a dog attended: e.g., did you like having a TD attend the class (explain)? Would you like for a TD to return to our class (explain)? Is/how is the classroom different with the TD in it (explain)? More than 90% of students completed the evaluations after each class. Next, a focus group was held with 12 students who self-selected at the end of the second course offering: e.g., Were you generally glad to have the TDs in the classroom? Why? What was your favourite part about having the TDs in the classroom? Why? What words would you use to describe having the TDs in the classroom? Third, an outside education specialist made observations during two classes (i.e., took detailed notes on student interactions with the TDs) during the second course offering. All data were coded according to an inductive approach to content analysis, whereby three authors on this paper independently coded and then combined the identified codes. Disagreements were few and were managed through consensus. Codes were organized into categories and then into three key themes, following Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic method. Ethics exemption was secured from the University of Saskatchewan Human Research Ethics Board given the evaluative focus, and ethics clearance was secured from the Animal Research Ethics Board.

RESULTS

We identified three themes from the content analysis, which indicated that having TDs in the classroom supported students by (i) increasing their mood and decreasing their stress; (ii), contributing to a welcoming atmosphere; and (iii), increasing their engagement. All three areas are identified in the literature as beneficial to student mental health.

Increased Student Mood and Decreased Stress

The TDs were identified as uplifting students' mood and decreasing feelings of stress. Students reported and were observed to be happy, smiling, and feeling positive upon seeing the TDs and when engaging with them. This was particularly true if students liked dogs and many reported that the TDs were "cute." Students also highlighted the benefit of petting and hugging the TDs to increase their mood and experience a sense of calm, relaxation, and consequently decrease their anxiety and overall stress. At times the TDs also provided comedic relief. Illustrative comments include:

Students smiled a lot when coming into the classroom and seeing a dog, compared to when a dog was not present. Having students smiling while lecturing was a different experience. (Instructor, July 26—questionnaire)

Lessens my anxiety, feel less stress (because she [TD] is so chill). (Student, August 9—focus group)

They [students] are happy with what appears to be unconditional acceptance by the dog. (Observer, November 17—observation)

Contributed to a Welcoming Atmosphere

The TDs were identified as contributing to a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom and challenging the traditional hierarchy. The classroom was identified as being less formal and more inviting, less intimidating and scary, less institutional, more comfortable and home-like, and as having positive energy. The students tended to view the instructor as more humane, caring, and approachable from witnessing their considerate interactions with the TDs. The TDs were also identified as “a great ice breaker to talk to other students about the dogs and meet around the dogs” (Student, December 8—*questionnaire*) and reason to initiate interaction with the instructor. Foremost, the TDs were perceived to be unconditionally accepting of the students. Examples include:

Sometimes you don't know what to expect from a Prof (they might be scary), so the dog helps us to see the Prof as more of a “normal” person instead of just a Prof. (Student, July 21—focus group)

Feels like a home atmosphere more, helps for people who are away from their home towns and families. (Student, July 21—questionnaire)

Makes for a comfortable and safe environment to learn in. (Student, October 27—questionnaire)

Increased Student Engagement

The TDs were identified as increasing student engagement in the course in two main ways—by assisting students with “being present” in the classroom and paying attention to the course material. The TDs provided a positive distraction in the classroom (not always beneficial, but mainly), a source for motivation, and increased focus and concentration. For example:

Addictions topic can be triggering, so nice to have the dog present. (Student, July 21—questionnaire)

Harm reduction—a quick glance to reset. Better than Facebook. (Student, December 8—questionnaire)

Was a very active participation class today... I think it had to do with Anna-Belle. She is such a relaxed dog (sleeping) and you have to put a bit of effort out for her to interact with you. Students answered a lot of questions. (Instructor, November 18—questionnaire)

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our findings offer novel insight into how TDs can support student mental health in the university classroom. The presence of TDs has the potential to counter the stressful environment typical of a classroom, and instead elicit positive feelings critical to student learning that have been witnessed in elementary and secondary classrooms with TDs present. Our findings are consistent with growing recognition of the need for post-secondary resources to reduce student stress and improve mental wellness. The National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students recommends the “embedding [of] mental health and well-being into learning environments” (MHCC, 2020, p. 9). Moreover, the Canadian Association of College & University Services and Canadian Mental Health Association (2013) calls for a “shift in culture [which] recognizes the entire post-secondary community is responsible for the mental health of its members and that mental health affects learning” (p. 12).

We had the unique opportunity to reflect upon what the TDs do effortlessly through their presence and interactions with students in a university classroom. Our findings suggest that research attention should be dedicated to formally examine the ways in which the three identified areas—increasing student mood and decreasing stress, contributing to a welcoming atmosphere, and increasing engagement—can positively impact student mental health in the classroom, with and without a TD present. This may be especially relevant at this time as the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted student mental health. While it is not logical to suggest that TDs be brought into all university classrooms, a case could be made for courses on particularly stressful topics, such as addictions, or for a specific lecture topic, such as suicide.

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