

Quality Matters, But Humanity and Wellbeing Come First:

Designing, Implementing, and Evidencing Holistic Online Learning

Presented by

Megan VanBuskirk, Dean of OPLS

Roxanna Medeiros, VP Online Ed

Institutional Affiliations

Germanna Community College

Maharishi International University

SESSION OVERVIEW

Session Introduction

Quality Matters (QM) gives us an evidence-based foundation for online course quality, but many learners are also navigating stress, burnout, inequity, and unstable learning environments. This session shares a practical, research-tested approach for designing online learning that meets QM expectations and intentionally supports student humanity and wellbeing.

Learning Outcomes

Explain the rationale for integrating learner wellbeing within QM-aligned course design to support equity and student success.

Identify practical strategies for embedding wellness principles within aligned outcomes, activities, and assessments.

Evaluate instructional design initiatives using quantitative and qualitative evidence related to learner wellbeing and academic performance.



PHASE 1 —PROBLEM FRAMING

The Crisis in Online Education

Online learning has expanded at an extraordinary pace over the past decade —yet the student support systems designed to sustain learners have not kept up. The result is a growing gap between institutional ambition and lived student experience.

Enrollment Without Support

Millions of learners have moved online, but course designs remain rooted in content-delivery models that do not address human needs *(CHLOE 10, 2025; Farnell et al., 2021; Khan, 2021; Lister & McFarlane, 2021; Lister et al., 2022).*

Mental Health Challenges

Isolation, cognitive overload, and lack of community contribute to measurable increases in learner anxiety and burnout *(Louis et al., 2022; Moustafa, 2021; Studente et al., 2021).*

Disengagement & Retention

Online courses continue to see higher dropout rates than their in-person counterparts, signaling a design opportunity *(Lee & Choi, 2011; Tinto, 2012).*

Missing Community

Without intentional design, learners experience courses as transactional—lacking the belonging that sustains long-term engagement *(Anderson et al. 2020; Garrison et all, 2000).*

Chronology

The last several years have provided chronological layers of transition through events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the J6 Capitol attack, domestic policy shifts, and international conflicts, adding broad layers of burden upon society and its learners *(Das et al., 2023; Celuch et al., 2024; Palgi et al., 2023).*





PHASE 1 — PROBLEM FRAMING

The Humanitarian & Wellbeing Deficit

Online course design typically prioritizes **content delivery and measurable outcomes** — but neglects the broader human needs that make learning possible in the first place. When a learner is emotionally overwhelmed or physically depleted, performance suffers regardless of content quality.

What's Missing

- Emotional support structures
- Community-building opportunities
- Stress management integration
- Life-balance awareness
- Space for reflective learning

The Consequence

This wellbeing deficit is not incidental — it is **designed in** by the absence of human-centered frameworks. Learner dissatisfaction, disengagement, and attrition are predictable outcomes when courses treat students as content consumers rather than whole human beings.

PHASE 1 — CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

A Holistic Framework for Online Learning

The proposed framework responds to the wellbeing deficit by **integrating course quality standards with learner wellness theory**. Rather than treating academic excellence and human flourishing as competing priorities, this model positions them as mutually reinforcing foundations of effective online education.



Quality Matters Standards

Evidence-based course design criteria ensuring alignment, clarity, and rigor across all course elements.



Holistic Wellness Theory

A multidimensional model of human wellbeing that recognizes physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of health.



Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Instructional approaches that prioritize student agency, voice, and meaningful participation in the learning process.



Freirean Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire's (1968) legacy of education as a humanizing practice rooted in equity, dialogue, and social transformation.

PHASE 1 — WELLNESS MODEL

Seven Domains of Wellness

The model draws on a **seven-domain wellness framework** — each representing a critical dimension of human well-being that directly influences a learner's capacity to engage, persist, and thrive in online education. These domains are not supplemental — they are *foundational*.

Physical

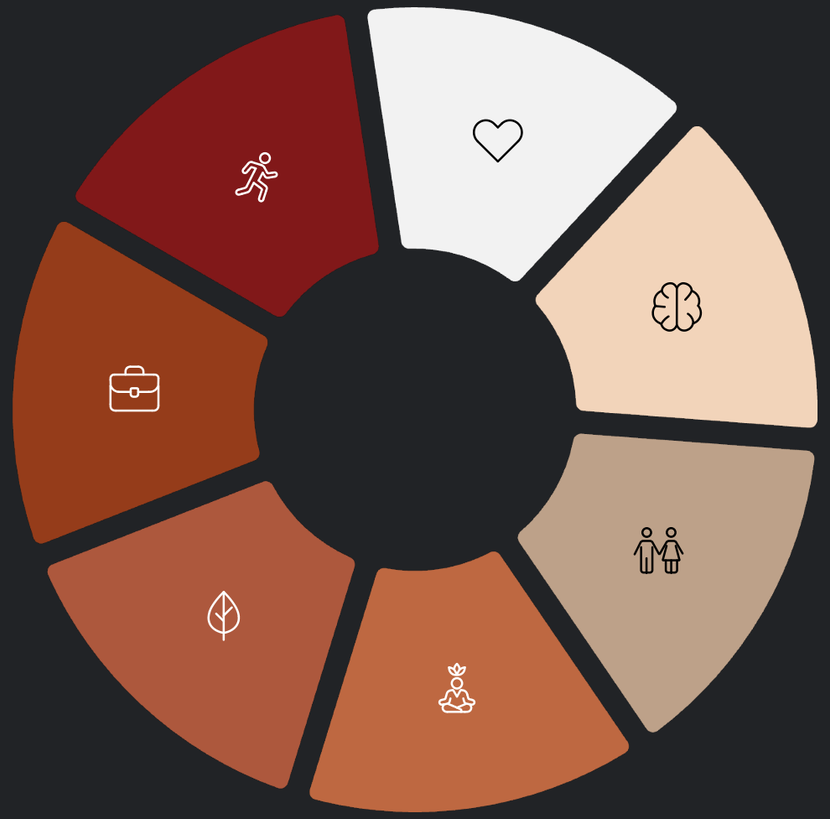
Body, rest, movement, and energy

Occupational

Purpose, balance, and meaningful work

Environmental

Safe, supportive learning spaces



Emotional

Self-awareness, coping, and regulation

Intellectual

Critical thinking and lifelong learning

Social

Connection, belonging, and community

Spiritual

Purpose, values, and meaning-making



PHASE 1 — HOLISTIC MODEL

The Holistic Instructional Design Model

The model's central innovation is the **intentional pairing of Quality Matters course design standards with specific wellness domains**. Every structural element of a course becomes an opportunity to support both academic rigor and human flourishing simultaneously.

Course Design Element	QM Standard Focus	Wellness Dimension
Course Overview & Introduction	Clarity, navigation, expectations	Emotional Safety
Learning Objectives	Measurable, aligned outcomes	Intellectual Growth
Assessments & Assignments	Authentic, aligned evaluation	Reflective Development
Learning Activities	Active, engaging participation	Social Connection
Learner Support Materials	Equitable access and resources	Occupational & Environmental



PHASE 2 —IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing the Model in Online Course Design

1

Analyze

Identify learner needs, wellness gaps, and QM alignment opportunities

2

Design

Map wellness domains to each course design element intentionally

3

Develop

Build materials, activities, and supports with wellness integration

4

Implement

Facilitate the course with the intentionally prepared design

5

Evaluate

Assess both academic performance and learner wellbeing outcomes

Phase 2 —Course Entry Experience

Course Overview and Introduction

The first experience a learner has inside a course sets the emotional tone for everything that follows. The holistic model transforms the course overview from a logistical formality into a **genuine act of welcome and psychological safety** .

Design Elements

- Warm, personalized instructor welcome video
- Transparent communication expectations
- Step-by-step technology orientation
- Wellness commitment statement from instructor
- Clear course roadmap to reduce anxiety

The Goal: Psychological Safety

Research consistently shows that **belonging and emotional safety** are prerequisite conditions for deep learning. When students feel welcomed, seen, and supported from day one, they are more likely to engage, take intellectual risks, and persist through challenges ***(Anderson et al., 2020; Lister & McFarlane, 2021; Lister et al., 2022; VanBuskirk & Medeiros, 2025).***

PHASE 2 —LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Learning Objectives and Alignment

In the holistic model, **learning objectives are reframed** to connect academic outcomes with personal growth and real-world application. Objectives are not merely performance benchmarks —they are invitations to intellectual wellness and metacognitive development *(Kolb, 1984; Bloom, 1956; Flavell, 1979; Zimmerman, 2002; VanBuskirk & Medeiros, 2025).*

1. Connect to Real-World Life Applications

Objectives explicitly link course content to learners' lived experiences, professional aspirations, and personal values —making learning feel purposeful rather than abstract *(Kolb, 1984)*

2. Encourage Reflective and Critical Thinking

Objectives incorporate reflection, synthesis, and self-assessment — building metacognitive awareness alongside disciplinary knowledge *(Bloom, 1956; Flavell, 1979).*

3. Promote Intellectual Wellness

By framing learning as an act of personal development, objectives cultivate curiosity, creative risk-taking, and a growth mindset throughout the course *(Zimmerman, 2002; Kolb, 1984; VanBuskirk & Medeiros, 2025).*

PHASE 2 — ASSESSMENT DESIGN

Assessments and Instructional Materials

Assessment design in the holistic model moves **beyond performance measurement** to create opportunities for genuine reflection, applied learning, and personal growth. Instructional materials are similarly curated to connect disciplinary content with learner wellbeing.



Reflective Assignments

Structured journaling and self-assessment tasks that invite learners to connect course content to personal experience and wellbeing.



Applied Learning Projects

Authentic tasks rooted in real-world contexts, reinforcing both disciplinary mastery and occupational wellness.



Self-Assessment Opportunities

Low-stakes check-ins that build metacognitive skill and reduce performance anxiety across the learning arc.



Wellness-Integrated Materials

Readings, videos, and resources that explicitly bridge disciplinary content with themes of life balance, equity, and human flourishing.



PHASE 2 —INTERACTION DESIGN

Learning Activities and Interaction

In the holistic model, **course activities are designed to cultivate community** —not simply transmit information. Social and emotional wellness are strengthened through structured interaction that values every learner's voice and experience.

Peer Dialogue

Facilitated discussions that build perspective-taking, empathy, and intellectual community across diverse student backgrounds.

Reflective Journaling

Private and shared journaling opportunities that deepen self-awareness and connect learning to personal meaning-making.

Collaborative Projects

Team-based tasks that foster interdependence, shared accountability, and the social dimension of intellectual work.

Contemplative Moments

Brief mindfulness or centering activities embedded into modules to help learners regulate stress and transition into focused engagement.

PHASE 2 —LEARNER SUPPORT

Learner Support and Accessibility

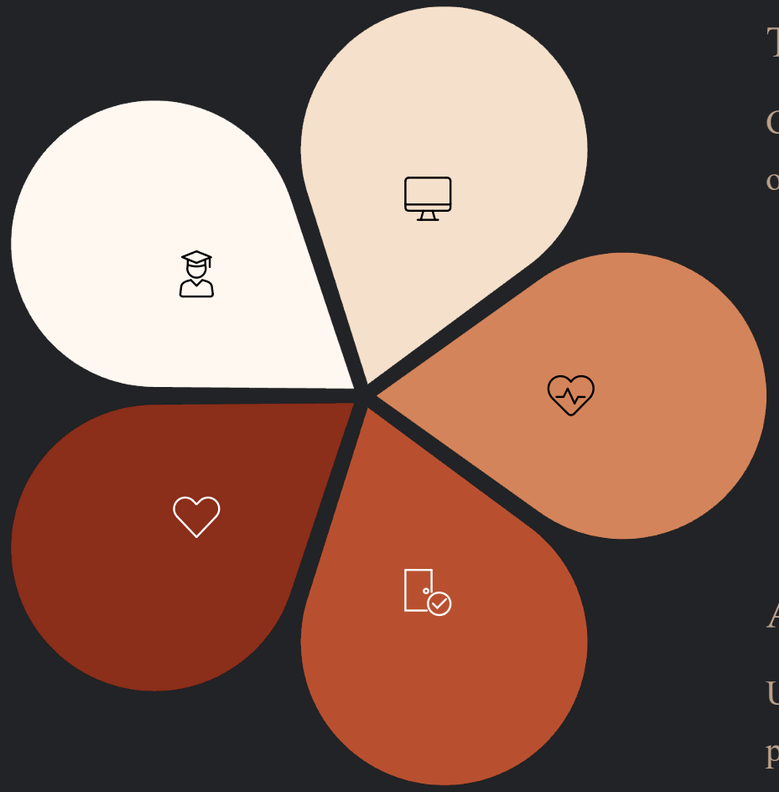
Holistic design requires more than great content —it demands that every learner has **equitable access to the resources they need to succeed** : academically, technically, emotionally, and physically. The model embeds a comprehensive support ecosystem directly into the course architecture.

Academic Resources

Tutoring, writing centers, and library access integrated into course navigation.

Wellness Resources

Food security, housing, and community support connections embedded for equitable access.



Technical Support

Clear pathways to IT help and LMS orientation for all learners.

Mental Health Resources

Visible links to counseling, crisis support, and wellness services.

Accessibility Tools

UDL-aligned materials ensuring full participation for all learners.

WALKTHROUGH

See It in Practice

A guided walkthrough of wellness-centered course design.

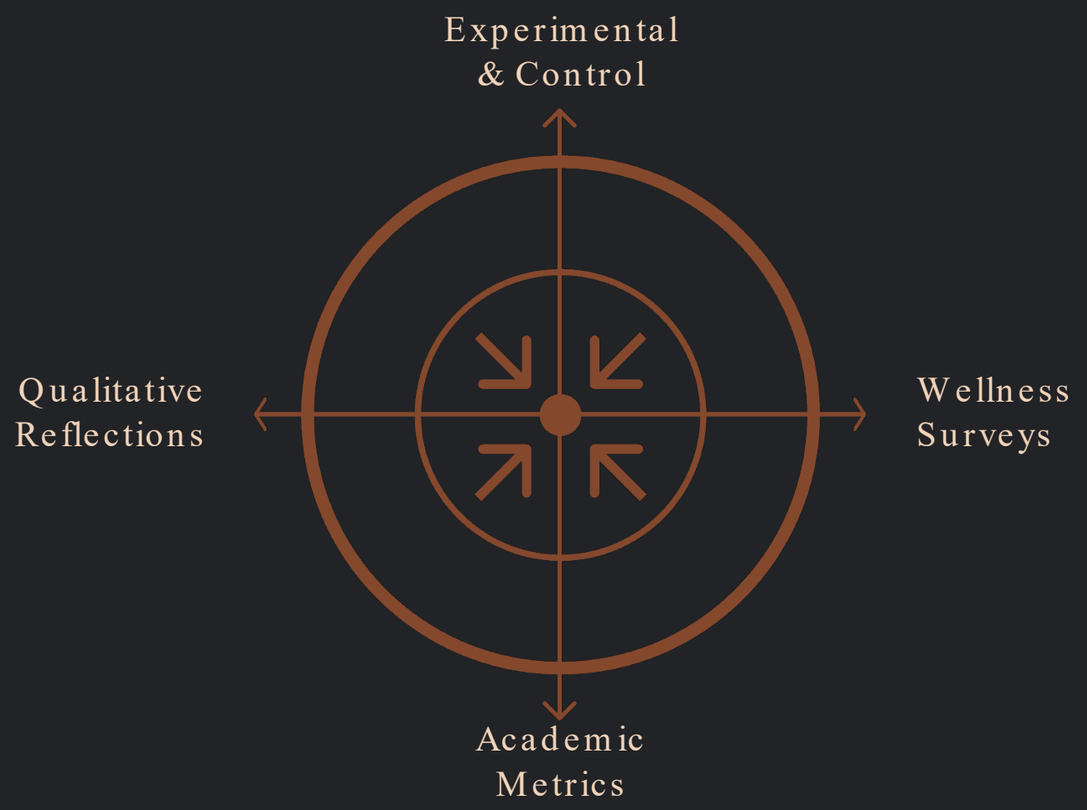
- Course Overview
- Objectives
- Materials
- Activities
- Assessments
- Technology
- Learner Support
- Accessibility

PHASE 3 —RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Design and Methodology

To evaluate the model's effectiveness, a **rigorous mixed -methods research design** was employed — combining the quantitative precision of experimental comparison with the contextual depth of qualitative inquiry. This dual approach captured both *what* changed and *how* learners experienced that change Mixed-methods design integrating experimental comparison and qualitative reflection (Garrison et al., 2000; Flavell, 1979; Kolb, 1984).

The integration of multiple data sources allowed researchers to triangulate findings, strengthening confidence in the model's impact across diverse learning contexts and student populations (VanBuskirk and Medeiros, 2025).



PHASE 3 — STUDY CONTEXT

Participants and Research Context

The study was conducted across **multiple undergraduate courses spanning several academic disciplines** , drawing participants from both community college and university settings to maximize breadth of applicability and demographic diversity.

2

Institution Types

Community college and four-year university settings

4+

Academic Disciplines

Spanning STEM, humanities, social sciences, and health fields

100%

Online Delivery

All courses delivered fully online across asynchronous formats

2

Study Groups

Experimental (holistic design) and control (traditional design) cohorts

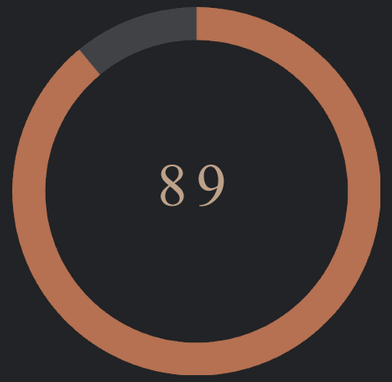
Participant diversity in age, cultural background, socioeconomic status, and prior academic experience strengthened the ecological validity of the findings and their generalizability to real-world online learning populations. Diverse online learner populations and contexts (Tinto, 2012; Lee &Choi, 2011; Lister et al., 2022).



PHASE 3 — QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Quantitative Results: Academic Performance

Courses designed using the holistic instructional model demonstrated **measurably stronger academic outcomes** than their traditionally designed counterparts across all three key performance indicators. Improvements in academic performance align with established learning and engagement frameworks (Bloom, 1956; Zimmerman, 2002).



Course Completion Rate



Passing Grade Rate



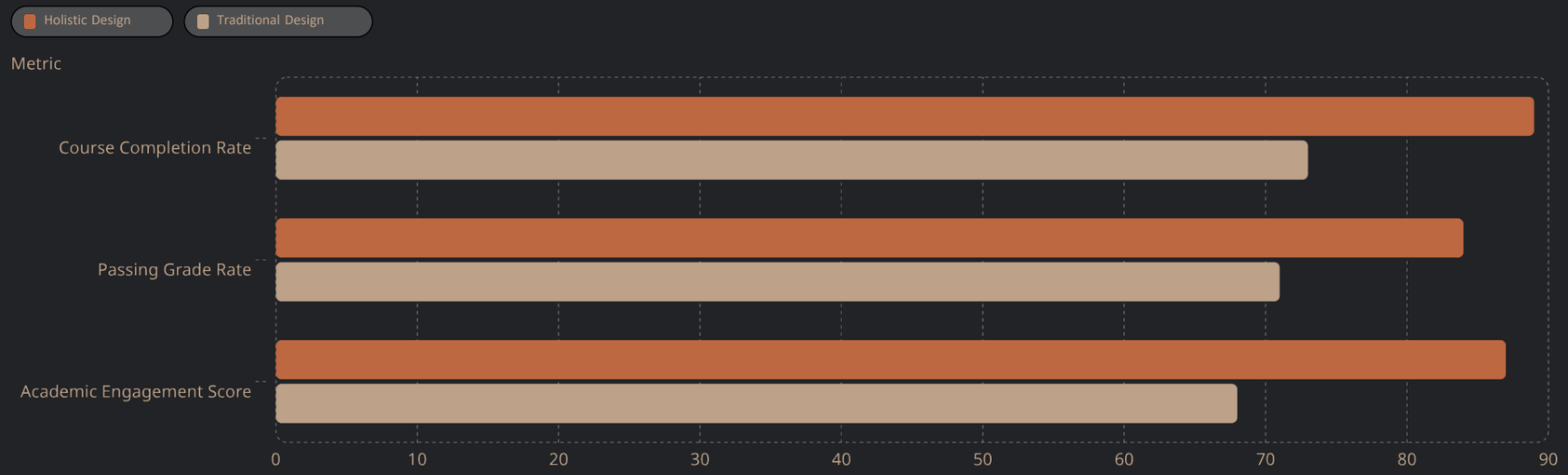
Academic Engagement Score

Key Findings

The holistic design group showed a **16-point gain in course completion** over the control group—a statistically significant difference with profound implications for learner equity and institutional retention goals.

Engagement scores reflected not just participation frequency, but *quality of interaction*—a nuanced outcome that traditional metrics often miss.

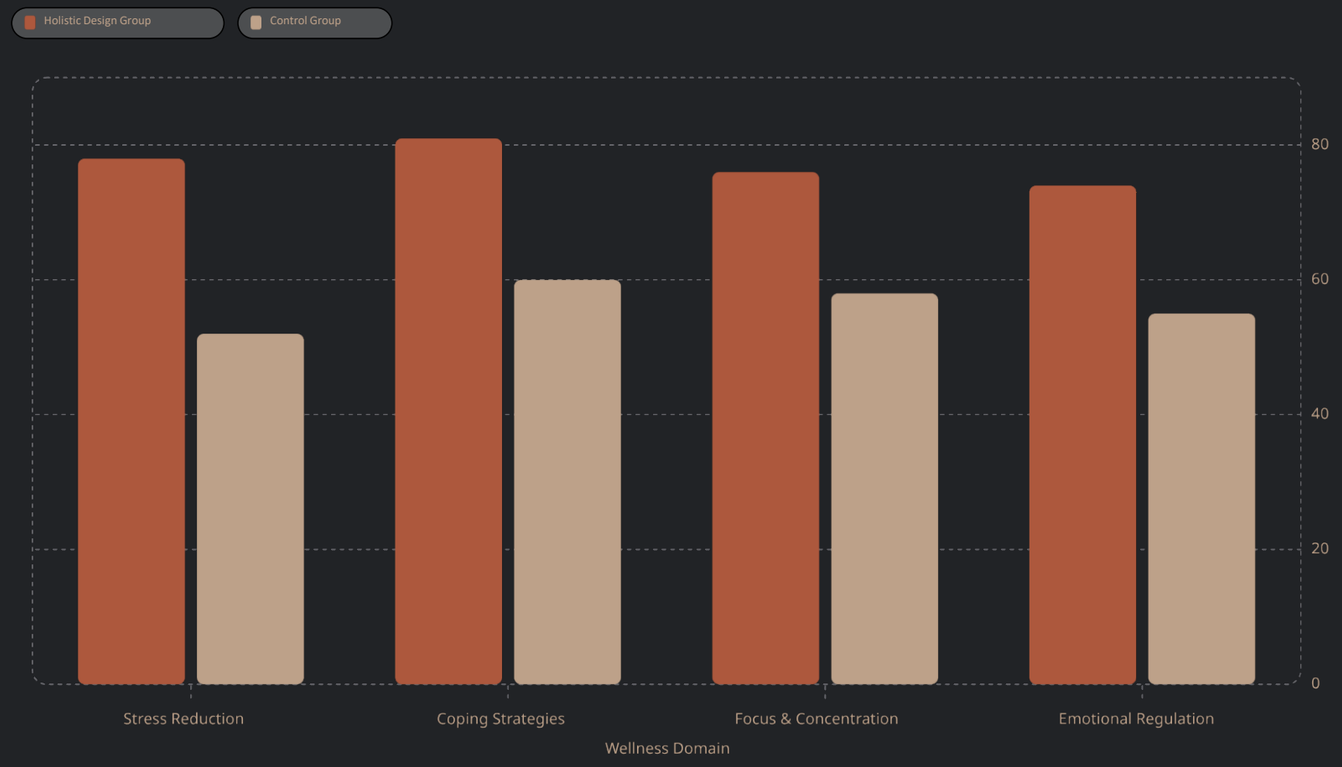
These findings suggest that investing in human-centered design does not compromise academic rigor—it **enhances it**.



PHASE 3 —WELLBEING OUTCOMES

Wellbeing Outcomes: Learner Flourishing

Wellness scores were gathered using validated pre- and post-course survey instruments. Across all four wellbeing indicators, holistic design course participants reported substantially higher improvement —with **emotional regulation and coping strategies** showing the most pronounced gains. Improvements in learner wellbeing align with research on embedded wellbeing design and student mental health (Lister et al., 2022; Das et al., 2023)



The data reveals that intentional course design functions as a powerful, structural **wellness intervention**. By embedding supportive frameworks directly into the curriculum, we move beyond merely tracking academic output to actively reducing learner suffering and cultivating profound resilience.

For instructional designers and institutions, this signifies a paradigm shift: course architecture is not neutral; it is a primary determinant of student flourishing. Designing for wellbeing is no longer an optional add-on—it is a core responsibility that bridges the gap between traditional instruction and the holistic development of the whole learner.

PHASE 3 — STUDENT VOICES

Student Experiences: Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data illuminated what the numbers could not fully capture — the **texture of transformation** in how learners experienced themselves and their education. Learner narratives reflect the importance of care, reflection, and meaning-making in learning (Freire, 1968; Anderson et al., 2020)

> "I actually felt like my instructor cared about me as a person, not just my grades. That made me want to show up and do the work."
>
> *— Undergraduate student, holistic design cohort*

> "The reflective journaling helped me realize I was carrying a lot of anxiety into every assignment. Naming it helped me manage it."
>
> *— Community college learner, holistic design cohort*

> "I never thought a class could make me feel more focused and less stressed at the same time. This one did."
>
> *— Online learner, university setting*

Thematic analysis of student narratives consistently surfaced four core themes: **increased calm and focus**, improved motivation and engagement, greater stress-management awareness, and genuine appreciation for the opportunity to learn as a whole person.

PHASE 3 — IMPLICATIONS

Implications and Future Directions

This research offers a clear message to the field: **online education must evolve from content delivery into human -centered learning environments**. The holistic instructional design model provides a scalable, evidence-based path to make that shift real.

01

Expand Research

Replicate holistic instructional design studies across more institutions, disciplines, and student populations.

02

Integrate Institutionally

Embed wellness frameworks into faculty development, course review, and quality standards.

03

Strengthen Equity

Center historically underserved learners in every support system and course experience.

04

Scale the Model

Develop transferable frameworks, templates, and professional development tools for all instructors.

Call to Action: Educators, instructional designers, and leaders — the evidence and ethical imperative are clear. The time to redesign online education is now.

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