Cultivating Resilience in the Age of Digital Distraction: A SoTL Case Study in Hospitality Higher Education.

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Abstract

This paper, situated within the practice of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), explores how resilience can be foregrounded in higher education at a time when digital distraction and instant gratification seem to dominate the student experience. Based in a private Swiss university of applied science in hospitality education, this article uses case study methodology to reflect on the redesign of an advanced research methods course where the technical challenges of KNIME software served as a vehicle for resilience building. Student grades as well as student feedback (n=27) was analysed using Martin and Marsh's (2006) 5C model: confidence, control, commitment, composure, and coordination, revealing both students' willingness but also their reluctance to engage consistently with cognitively demanding tasks. The course was subsequently reviewed to make resilience explicit through graded reflection and collaborative learning in a psychologically safe environment. While findings remain context-bound, the study highlights the responsibility of higher education to cultivate resilience deliberately, preparing graduates for dynamic, customer-facing workplaces where adaptability is as vital as technical competence.

Key Words

Resilience, assessment, digital distraction, SoTL, hospitality and tourism education

Track

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Introduction

Resilience has become a critical attribute in contemporary higher education and graduate employability frameworks. Employers identify resilience, the capacity to adapt to challenges, persist in the face of difficulty, and recover from setbacks, as a valued professional competency in the current workforce. Within the hospitality industry in particular, where employees must navigate high levels of stress and rapid change, and where burnout levels are high, the characteristic of resilience is highly valued. If resilience is to be genuinely fostered rather than assumed, higher education institutions must design learning environments that intentionally cultivate it. This study contributes to that endeavour by exploring how students' resilience can be explicitly the focus of a course that can otherwise be perceived as overwhelming.

The novelty of this inquiry lies in its positioning within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) tradition (Hutchings et al., 2011). Rather than proposing a definitive model of resilience education, the paper adopts a reflective and exploratory stance, sharing insights from classroom practice and inviting further dialogue among educators.

This study addresses a gap in the current literature concerning how resilience, or slow consistent doggedness in the face of challenge, can be purposefully nurtured within university classrooms in a context of digitally mediated instant gratification and short attention spans. Understanding how educators can design learning experiences that restore and valorise cognitive struggle constitutes the central focus of this paper.

The research adopts a case study approach, examining the redesign of an Advanced Research Methods course within a Swiss private university of applied sciences specialising in hospitality education. The methodological design combined quantitative and qualitative elements: descriptive statistics from course grades and Likert-scale feedback (1–5) were analysed alongside thematic coding of open-ended student comments from the same feedback.

Findings were mixed. While a subset of students embraced the opportunity to stretch their capabilities and reflected positively on the challenging experience, others experienced substantial discomfort. Many expressed a desire for greater scaffolding and reported feelings of overwhelm when support was intentionally withheld to promote autonomous problem-solving. These responses suggest that resilience cannot be assumed, but must be carefully cultivated through collaborative learning and a foregrounding of acceptance of struggle in a psychologically safe environment.

Future work will explore whether maintaining high cognitive challenge while embedding a constant reflection on one's resilience and contribution to collaborative learning can strengthen students' perceived learning and adaptive capacities. In this sense, resilience development becomes both the process and the outcome of learning: a shared pedagogical endeavour that prepares graduates for the complexities of professional life.

Literature foundation

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

With the aim always of improving student learning, a teacher who engages in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) undertakes systematic inquiry of their teaching and will consequently go public with the results (Hutchings et al., 2011). By sharing findings which have been gathered a systematic way, teachers can enhance practice and contribute to the field. SoTL research is modest though; it does not aim to "have all the answers" and potentially raises more questions than it resolves.

The impact of the digital world

The students at the heart of this study, Generation Z, have grown up in a digital world with a mobile smartphone in their hands. These devices enable communication through social media and through their notifications function can go as far as influencing academic results. Although over a decade old, and referring to Facebook and text messaging as distractors, Junco's (2012) work still resonates today. At the time, he found a negative relationship between these screen-based distractions and students' GPA. Since then, social media has flourished with adaptive algorithms designed specifically to maximise screen time (De et al., 2025) with short content that can be scrolled through rapidly. Platforms which are popular with the students of today such as Tiktok and Instagram are major sources of distraction (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023) while excessive use of smartphones is associated with poorer attentional control (De-Sola Gutiérrez et al., 2016). These platforms' addictive nature, whilst not explicitly declared by the companies concerned, has been highlighted publicly (Orlowski, 2020). An added distractor is notifications. Again, these are not restricted to the phone, which can be hidden out of sight during a lesson to reduce its distraction factor, but are now on the screen and flashing to attract the owner's attention. Recent research has demonstrated repeatedly that such disturbances are distracting and have a tangible impact of cognitive ability and working memory (Kaminske et al., 2022; Kushlev et al., 2016; Xavier et al., 2024). Additionally, and recently, the availability of a digital resource to provide instant answers and content has been demonstrated to lead to cognitive debt (Kosmyna et al., 2025). More and more authorities are banning phones from schools (Sundel, 2025) indicating the concern about their impact on young people's learning. Lacking from the research though is any post-COVID era work specifically demonstrating a causal link between immersion in such a digital world at a young age and the ability to address struggles which demand maintained effort.

Working through difficulties

Two terms are used in academia in relation to dealing with and bouncing back from adversity. One is grit, defined as sustained effort over the long term (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit has been shown to predict sustained attention and academic achievement even when students face competing priorities (Muenks et al., 2016) and to overlap with self-control – but in the long-term rather than moment-to-moment (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). One could imagine that the self-control needed by students to resist the instant dopamine release from their social media feeds could be more linked to a student's immediate self-control than long-term grit.

The second term used by academics is resilience which, according to Werner and Smith's (1982) seminal work, is understood to be the capacity to recover from setbacks, adversity and stress and be less long-term than grit. It requires adaptability, emotional strength and coping mechanisms and is boosted by relationships, self-efficacy and autonomy. There was a proliferation of studies into students' mental health and resilience immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic (E.g.: Ang et al., 2022; Raghunathan et al., 2022; Wattick et al., 2023) with a recent study which found a negative relationship between stress and resilience in college students (Ansari & Iqbal, 2025).

While both terms involve perseverance, resilience has a focus on the situational and is socially supported, while grit is enduring and personally sustained. The term resilience will be used in this work.

Resilience in the workplace

Recent studies have demonstrated how important resilience is becoming in the current workplace. Resilience is now the number one assessed trait by employers according to a recent survey of recruiters (Inglethorpe, 2025) and in hospitality, the ability to adapt to novel situations without fluster is becoming more and more relevant (Hussain et al., 2023). It seems therefore beholden on teachers to focus specifically on this character trait and foster it in educational encounters with students.

Resilience in the classroom

While resilience is a trait of an individual it does not evolve in a vacuum. Recent work by Wang et al. (2025) makes this clear and stresses the importance of leveraging a supportive teaching and learning environment to enable students to develop coping strategies. They also highlight the important role of peer support in this endeavour. The teacher can and should therefore ensure that students feel psychologically safe in the classroom environment, that they can speak up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes without fear of humiliation or punishment (Edmondson, 1999). Additionally, in order for resilience to be explicitly taught, it needs to be conceptualised in a meaningful way to students. Martin and Marsh's (2006) clear "5 C's" model of resilience was chosen in this case to make explicit the components of resilience to the students. With its five alliterative concepts: attention on confidence (self-efficacy), coordination (planning), control, composure (low anxiety), and commitment (persistence) is it simple to comprehend and to auto-evaluate. Although the model can be criticised for focusing on the individual rather than recognising systemic problems, for its grounding in secondary schools rather than higher educational settings and potentially for its pre-COVID-era creation, it provided a model which could be easily shared with and understood by students.

What follows is an exposé of the evolution of the focus of one course focus to bring resilience centre-stage.

Methods

At the centre of the SoTL reflection was a case study of the semester-7 undergraduate course in advanced research methods taught by the author at a private Swiss university of applied science in hospitality education. The course is mainly a self-study course where, in groups, students discover how to use a particular software programme, KNIME, to answer a research question of their choice with secondary data obtained from the institutional database. The software is not taught to the students. Instead, they are explicitly encouraged to share their struggles and discoveries with each other in a collaborative learning environment. The faculty responsible ensures that students can freely admit their difficulties and their errors by creating a psychologically safe classroom setting. The challenges are multiple: the software does not work on all the students' devices, the students have to learn how to use the software themselves and the teacher provides no guidance on the software use. While all groups are expected to achieve the task of using KNIME to answer a research question using simple statistical tests, they are also graded on their regular presentations in which they are required to honestly present their challenges and successes to their peers. There was, in this iteration of the course, no obligation to work on the "next steps" in class.

The data analysed below are the course results as well as the comments and scores from the 27 students out of 33 on the course who provided anonymous feedback collected by the institution.

Results

An exploration of the exam results shows that 5 out of 33 students failed the course due to either limited engagement with the course or to a lack of submission of the final task – a graphical abstract of their work. Analysis of the 30 students who submitted all tasks shows an average grade of 76.26% and a SD of 13.93 indicating a moderate and acceptable degree of variation in student performance. Most students achieved results within about ±14 percentage points of the mean, suggesting relatively consistent attainment across the group and no evidence of extreme divergence in learning outcomes.

Analysis of the feedback shows an overall feedback score of 3.51/5 which, at lower than 4, is less than satisfactory and calls for faculty reflection. The wide variation across respondents (SD = 1.19) is echoed in the qualitative data, where students expressed both appreciation for structured support and deep frustration with the complexity and perceived irrelevance of the imposed software programme, KNIME. When viewed through the lens of Martin and Marsh's (2006) 5-C resilience model, these reflections highlight both the presence and absence of resilience processes across the cohort.

Confidence was visible where students reframed challenge as growth: "I really learned a lot about KNIME and I struggled a lot but [thanks to the teacher who] … made us use our brains." The perception of a safe and supportive learning environment further reinforced belief in their abilities. However, confidence was fragile, and often undermined when students struggled to see the relevance of their learning to future careers, "waste of time" and "useless" were descriptors used.

Control was one of the most contested areas. Several students reported feeling disempowered: "Students were expected to navigate a complex data platform almost entirely on their own … this was overwhelming and left many feeling lost and unmotivated," but it is interesting that this comment is written in the third person, and not the more usual first. The lack of clear, step-by-step guidance left some unable to connect their effort with a concrete outcome illustrating how reduced control eroded resilience.

Despite this, commitment was evident. Students persisted with tasks, even while voicing frustration: "KNIME might not be the most useful tool … but it was interesting to present about the process and struggle learning/using it with honesty in each class." The willingness to continue despite doubts about the utility of the imposed programme reflects perseverance, though at times it was accompanied by disengagement or resentment.

Composure emerged in students' accounts of humour and relational support. One commented: "great professor and taught us a lot," while another noted: "No KNIME please – save the next BBA7s the pain, no KNIME generational trauma." These remarks illustrate the encouragement of humour in the learning environment when students were faced with challenges.

Finally, coordination was highlighted in both positive and negative terms. Some valued the scaffolding of weekly sessions: "The session for each week let me know what we do for next sessions. Well and easy to understand." Others, however, felt that the absence of systematic guidance left them unable to plan effectively or apply their learning beyond the classroom.

Discussion

As a result of this reflection, counterintuitively, the main course structure has actually been changed very little in its subsequent iteration: students still work in groups using KNIME with no faculty in-put. However, resilience is placed at the forefront of the learning experience. At the outset, the students are now exposed to the concept of resilience and explore different models, ending with Martin and Marsh's. They share their experiences of getting "out of their comfort" zone and of instances where they have had to work on their resilience. Their position as soon-to-be-graduates is highlighted and juxtaposed with the literature exposed above regarding the importance of resilience in the workplace. In every presentation, undertaken in groups to the faculty and not to the entire class, students are expected to reflect and share their resilience journey since the beginning / last time. The assessment criteria for these four presentations shown in Tables 1 and 2 below. The students receive an individual grade for each presentation which are worth, in total, 60% of the course grade.

Table 1 Assessment criteria presentations 1, 2 and 3

Criterion	**Distinction 90-100%**	**Merit 75-89%**	**Pass 60-74%**	**Needs Improvement <60%**
Contribution since last presentation (Commitment)	Explains clearly and specifically what they did; shows persistence and effort in moving work forward.	Describes some work completed; moderate persistence.	Minimal or vague description of contribution; limited persistence.	No evidence of contribution or progress.
Reflection on difficulties (Control & Composure)	Openly identifies challenges; explains how they responded; demonstrates belief their contribution can influence outcomes; speaks calmly and constructively.	Mentions challenges and partial strategies; some composure.	Mentions difficulties vaguely; limited sense of influence or calm.	Avoids difficulties, blames others, or shows frustration.
Confidence (Self-efficacy and ownership)	Speaks clearly, shows belief in own ability to learn and contribute, proactive in describing next steps.	Some confidence but occasionally hesitant; takes partial ownership.	Hesitant, relies heavily on others, limited ownership.	Very unsure; avoids speaking or contributing meaningfully.
Coordination (Planning)	Explains clearly how their work fits into group progress; shows awareness of planning and task distribution; actively supports coordination.	Some awareness of planning and how tasks fit together.	Limited awareness of planning; vague sense of group progress.	No awareness of planning; cannot link their work to group goals.
Contribution to class (Peer learning)	Offers concrete insights/strategies that could help other groups; reflects on what they have learnt that's transferable.	Provides some learning for peers, moderately helpful.	Minimal contribution; vague or generic comments.	Offers nothing of value to others.

Table 2 Assessment criteria presentation 4

Criterion	Distinction 90-100%	Merit 75-89%	Pass 60-74%	Needs Improvement <60%
Reflection on resilience (Self-learning)	Gives thoughtful, specific examples of challenges faced and how they developed Confidence, Coordination, Control, Composure, and Commitment; clear evidence of growth.	Reflects on some challenges and links to resilience; some evidence of growth.	Mentions challenges but with limited connection to resilience or learning.	Minimal or no reflection on resilience; superficial comments.
Contribution to peers (Sharing)	Clearly explains what their group contributed to the class; highlights insights/strategies that were useful to others.	Describes contributions but with limited clarity or depth.	Mentions contribution vaguely or in general terms.	Offers no clear evidence of group contribution.
Learning from peers (Receiving)	Gives concrete, specific examples of what they learnt from other groups; shows reflection on how it shaped their own understanding.	Identifies something learnt from others but in general terms.	Mentions learning vaguely; not well integrated.	No evidence of learning from others.

Reflection on resilience is now graded, as can be seen above, so is given importance. Students complete a questionnaire on their resilience at the beginning of the course and are told they will re-do the questionnaire at the end of the course to determine if there have been changes to their self-reported resilience. Resilience is being put front and centre of the course in a setting which remains designed as being psychologically safe but deliberately challenging. Students are now required to work in class during and after the presentations to the faculty so their collaborative working can be observed and encouraged by the teacher. Whether such changes to the course will have a positive impact on student feedback in an age when resilience seems to have been usurped by immediate gratification through a digital device is yet to be determined.

Limitations

Reflections on scholarship of teaching and learning are, by their nature, limited in scope. However, while the findings of a single lecturer are relevant to her context, the matters raised by this article may be transferable and set others thinking about their own practice – and indeed asking more questions than are resolved.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how resilience can be highlighted for hospitality students in higher education at a time when it seems that instant gratification and a resistance to engage in difficult tasks are commonplace. Through a SoTL lens on a case study, the reflections presented here demonstrate that resilience is not an abstract construct but is expressed in students' attempts to manage complexity, uncertainty, and distraction. While the technical challenges of KNIME were often experienced as frustrating and even irrelevant, they also provided a valuable vehicle for students to practise the components of Martin and Marsh's (2006) 5C model - sometimes successfully, sometimes less so. Reflection on the teacher's perception that the students lacked the inner desire and strength, and maybe also the confidence, to "do hard things" led to an explicit integration of the concept of resilience into the teaching of the course.

For hospitality education in particular, the implications of including resilience explicitly into the student experience are significant. As graduates enter workplaces that are constantly moving, customer-facing, and technologically mediated, their capacity to cope with stressors and maintain composure will be as important as their technical knowledge. Higher education therefore carries a responsibility not only to teach disciplinary content but also to design experiences that deliberately cultivate resilience.

Of course, the insights offered here remain context-bound and partial. A single teacher's reflections on a case study cannot and should not provide definitive claims. They might, however, transfer to other educators who are struggling with the intrusion of the digital world into their teaching environment and who also have a desire to foster resilience in the young people they encounter in their classrooms.

By making resilience explicit, by inviting students to reflect, safely and without judgement, on their own responses to difficulty, and by situating these reflections within the expectations of professional life, this course change represents one modest attempt to prepare students for a world of constant digital distraction and unrelenting change. The students' feedback will determine to what extent this exercise was successful.

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