

Peer mentoring: Improving student outcomes by collaboration

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Abstract

The current tertiary environment is becoming increasingly diverse and can include students from a wide range of cultural and educational backgrounds as well as students studying via onsite or online delivery modes. This new reality brings with it an equally wide range of learning issues and differing “cultural capital” (Zepke & Leach, 2007, p.656) which need to be addressed. Consequently, the question of ‘How is a sense of community developed amongst such a diverse group?’ must be raised. At Bethlehem Tertiary Institute (BTI), the Learning Support team is attempting to address that question by adding a peer mentoring programme to its toolbox; namely, we are encouraging senior students to journey alongside junior learners, offering academic and social support and encouragement. Reflecting our institutional vision to be “relational, responsive, and transformative”, the goal of this programme is to encourage learners to partner with their peers by offering guidance on how to initiate this process, which ultimately would contribute to fostering relationships and positively affect student academic success.

Introduction

Peer mentoring or tutoring at tertiary institutions can take many forms and goes by various names across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and here in New Zealand: both formal programmes such as Supplemental Instruction (SI), PASS and PAL, and less structured, more organic buddy systems (Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky, & Cowley, 2014; Miles, 2010; Sultan, Narayansany, Kee, Kuan, Manickan, & Tee, 2013). At Bethlehem Tertiary Institute (BTI), the Learning Support team recognises that “offering a wide range of academic opportunities is essential to

meet the varying strengths and needs of a diverse student population” (McKinney, Saxe, & Cobb, 1998, p. 3) and is encouraging our students’ growth by establishing a peer mentoring scheme. This seems likely to be a positive contributor to the well-being and academic success of students and, as a result, the institution, which we hope to see reflected in deferral/withdrawal data and student feedback. Since all of our students are being trained in ‘people-helping’ professions (teaching, counselling, and social work), this seems like a strategy that would fit well into the ethos of our institution.

Communication and working with others underpin all of our academic programmes. Realistically, making any one change is not a panacea but we do have a responsibility to our students to offer a range of strategies to meet different needs and have a positive impact on their education.

Theoretical underpinnings of peer learning: We learn more together

Nāku te rourou nāu te rourou ka ora ai te iwi. This Māori whakatauki can be interpreted as follows: “with my basket and your basket, the people will live”. In other words, mutual cooperation and building something together benefit all parties. As such, peer learning “can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (Topping, 2005, p. 631). There is much research to support the depth of understanding that comes with interaction and critical thinking. Based on the experience of students living in learning communities, “the quality of interpersonal interactions with important agents of socialization (faculty and peers)” makes a positive contribution to increased academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, p. 344). In particular, the increasingly popular social constructivist theory of learning espouses the benefits of people working together to create knowledge (Graham, 2002; McKinney, Saxe, & Cobb, 1998; Palinscar, 1998; Paul, Smith, & Doehney, 2012). Knowledge is not just handed down by the educator; rather, it is constructed by engaged participants.

According to Astin (1993) and Ho (2006), the greatest influence over students, especially in the first year of studies, actually stems from the peer group, so why not be strategic with this resource as a means of empowering the students to be a part of their

learning? It has also been shown that one of the driving factors influencing a student's persistence in completing his/her study is the peer group (Banseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006): "Ample research literature is available to show that peers can play a significant role in enhancing a student's learning and personal development" (Sultan et al., 2013, p. 59). Indeed, the students involved not only experience academic development, but also hone their interpersonal skills.

Alongside persistence or grit, integration within the institution is one of the critical indications of success especially with first-year students (Earl, 1988). Tinto (1975) suggests that this integration occurs "primarily through informal peer group associations" (p. 107), something that peer mentoring groups can address. Students within these groups not only work on academic and tertiary study skills, but also socialise with their fellow students. If they are deliberately encouraged to seek each other out and work in academic peer groups, both within and across cohorts, the resulting relationship building can positively affect outcomes, both for the individual participants as well as the institution (Drake, 2011; McKinney, Saxe, & Cobb, 1998).

Peer mentoring with distance students

Not only onsite students, but also distance students can benefit from outside-the-classroom interaction with their peers. Approximately two-thirds of BTI's students study via distance, so it is a priority for us to promote reciprocal peer relationships outside of the classroom. These can be facilitated through the use of technology such as online communication forums within Moodle, email, Skype, or telephone (Beltman & Schaeten, 2012). Through these technologies, the distance learner is able to be included within the institutional community (Henderson, 2016). We also try to encourage regional meetings where students living within common geographic zones gather face-to-face, perhaps once a semester (Graham, 2002). Forming meaningful connection is an important aspect for distance learners because there can be a disproportionately higher rate of attrition from this group--with contributing factors such as perceived disconnection or loneliness affecting study perseverance (Fischer, 2003). Truly, "academic and social integration are key factors influencing retention" so it is beneficial

for the institution to take a systematic approach when it comes to offering distance students a comparable level of support to those based on-campus (Reed, 2015, para. 1).

Active Learning

The collegial interactions embedded into peer mentoring are designed to promote active learning in which the student takes responsibility for his/her own learning (Topping, 1996). This in turn influences the development of metacognition and critical thinking skills. Clearly, a goal of higher education is to promote independent learning which begins by the individual's attitude shifting from that of receiver of knowledge to active participant in the learning process (Hoi Kwan & Downing, 2010; Lipsky, 2011). This transformation is a significant step and the difference between secondary and tertiary learning; the responsibility for learning is in the hands of the learner. It has been shown that "higher levels of student engagement" result in higher quality products and a more in-depth level of knowing (Errey & Wood, 2011, p.22) because "the more involved one is in the process...the deeper the learning and the better the recall" (Jacobs, Hurley, & Unite, 2008, p.8). The Learning Support team at BTI is being intentional about encouraging this shift towards learner-centred education (van der Meer & Scott, 2008) by incorporating peer mentoring within the range of strategies it offers to students.

Initial development of peer mentoring at BTI—Teacher Education cluster

In 2015, in a Student Support Committee meeting, one of our Primary Teacher Education students approached the Learning Support team and expressed interest in developing a programme in which fellow students would meet in pairs or small groups, to work together and discuss course material and assignments, in order to support and encourage one another. These groups (dyads or small groups) would be across the year groups, consisting of students enrolled in the Early Childhood and Primary Education Programmes. Year One students would meet with a Year Two or Three student (although, in actuality, the prospective students who showed interest in becoming mentors were from Year Two only) who had demonstrated successful completion of

the course in which they were mentoring. Personality was also a determining factor as to the suitability of the peer supporter; those who were both teachable and willing to work collegially with others made for ideal candidates. This initiative was largely driven by the individual student, a point that became a challenge later on, as more students needed to take on leadership roles in order for the scheme to be more student-driven and less staff-driven. The mentors were initially dubbed 'peer experts', a title the Learning Advisers changed to peer mentors, in order to reflect the philosophy of support from others who are walking ahead in the journey and thus can relate more closely, reflecting on and drawing from recent shared experiences. The Learning Advisers also drafted and provided a set of guidelines for the mentors that included information on how to encourage and guide their peers, but stay within the bounds of academic integrity.

The peer mentoring scheme was proposed to the student body during one of their regular cohort-wide group meetings (called 'All-Together'), with the intention of beginning within four to six weeks. The students who were interested in mentoring signed off on the guidelines, stating that they had read them and would adhere to them. Ten students participated during each of the first two semesters. Mentors were introduced to their respective classes during All-Together meetings, and conveyed information via the Moodle communication channel or email. Students who wanted to work with a mentor were encouraged to contact one electronically or other means, or were welcome to approach them before or after classes. A mentor suggested that they create posters to display, in order to increase awareness of their availability but this did not eventuate. At the start, the volunteers made themselves available in a specified space in the library several lunchtimes per week. As the terms progressed, the meetings shifted more to student-initiated times, rather than set times/days and the peer mentors worked in pairs, generally addressing questions related to assignment organisation and focus or general study skills.

Mentor recruitment and training

During the recruitment of mentors, we communicated the mutual benefits in the peer mentoring relationship (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). In the second semester of 2015, the Learning Advisor who agreed to be the staff liaison held an initial thirty-minute training session for the mentors, at a mutually convenient time in the library. The focus of this session was an introduction to what the scheme entailed, a discussion on the motivation behind becoming a mentor, and the mutual benefits for both mentors and mentees, such as graduate attributes and the following employability skills: communication, self-management, critical thinking, problem-solving, and working effectively with others (Jackson, 2014).

A follow-up meeting was held in August (one month later), which eight out of ten mentors attended. The goal was to self-assess learning styles and discuss tips for working with students with different learning styles as well as how to promote active learning (Lipsky, 2011). Following on from that, at the September meeting, we discussed critical thinking and questioning skills. The feedback from mentors' experiences thus far related to informal chats with the students they had met, feeding into structure of assignments and time management and how to spread out workload. The November meeting, the last for that year, was about self-evaluation, reflecting on the employability skills that the mentors felt they had utilised, and sharing what went well and what they could have done differently. The Learning Adviser elicited feedback using three short-answer questions adapted from Lincoln University's *Peer Facilitator Handbook* (Ma'auga, 2015, p. 57-58): "Which of your strengths did you feel were the most useful for a peer mentor?", "What strategies did you use to make students feel that you were a first-year once?" and "What strategies worked so well that you would like other peer mentors to know about?" It was agreed that we would meet again prior to the start of the next semester and each mentor received a certificate of participation, as recognition of their efforts.

The primary benefit of working with a peer mentor as cited by students was forming relationships and feeling more connected to the institution. As this was positive and at the request of lecturers from the Counselling and Social Work clusters, we decided to expand this programme to the Counselling and Social Work students, and

also began looking at ways to tailor it to meet the needs of the distance learners, which was proving to be more complicated. The Learning Advisers encouraged the use of technology for the distance students (email or Skype) to facilitate communication and are currently pairing mentors/mentees within the same geographic region to increase the likelihood of occasional face-to-face contact, in order to facilitate relationship building.

Challenges in 2016

Participant statistics

Participant experience was gauged by the feedback gleaned from student-initiated communication and anecdotes; admittedly, more specific and useful feedback may be better elicited by using targeted evaluations, and less subjective evidence. Moreover, the exact number of student participants was unclear: In the future, a more comprehensive system for identifying participants needs to be developed and communicated to the mentors by the Learning Adviser, for the purposes of record keeping (e.g. does a passing question from a student count as “mentoring” or are only “sit down” appointments counted?) and monitoring programme effectiveness.

Teacher Education cluster

One of the challenges in the new academic year came as a result of the restructuring of the teacher education programme. This made it difficult for the current Year 2s to offer to be a mentor for several papers, where structure and content now differed from the previous year. The timing of Practicums also proved demanding for the Year 3 students, who were regularly away for long stretches at a time and felt they could not properly establish relationships or maintain them effectively with those they wanted to mentor. As alluded to earlier, the mentoring programme started to slip into a more staff-driven, rather than student-driven initiative. The original student initiators were now in Year 3 and, combined with their periods of time offsite and slow turn-around of email responses, communication was proving problematic. Consequently, there was a lower uptake of the programme in the second semester of 2016.

Counselling and Social Work Clusters

The peer mentoring scheme was proposed to the Counselling and Social Work clusters at the start of the year, when all students—part-time and full time, onsite and distance—

attended their intensive block course. There were six students who were interested in becoming mentors, although one had a medical issue shortly thereafter, so had to withdraw. The Learning Adviser maintained a minimum level of contact with the five mentors, primarily via email, but also over the phone. Their main concern was lack of student engagement, with one mentor receiving no contacts. This was surprising as interest was initially gauged by a staff member involved in the programme and had seemed high. During a subsequent one-on-one appointment with the Learning Advisor, one of the students expressed that she was glad to finally get a learning support appointment as she had been waiting for three weeks to ask about an assignment. When the Adviser had asked if she talked to her fellow classmates or mentors, the student indicated that she had not thought to do that! Perhaps it is the learning culture and perception that needs to be addressed: that staff are not the ‘fount of all knowledge’ and students can learn from one another.

Next steps

Looking ahead to 2017, this year we are attempting to market the peer mentoring programme to all students: initially during the intensive block courses when all students are onsite, and then periodically by posting messages and videos on the group communication forums, to serve as reminders. We are also looking into the practicality of creating an online forum inaccessible to course tutors, to create a ‘safe’ place where questions can be addressed without fear of repercussions or looking ‘dumb’ to academic staff in the paper. Moreover, we are in the process of systematically evaluating the metrics pertaining to assignment and course pass rates, along with deferrals/withdrawals, to ascertain if there is a correlation with students who participate in peer mentoring, in order to measure the effectiveness of the scheme.

Conclusion

There has been much research into the benefits of peer learning over the last few decades and peer tutoring programmes can be seen in tertiary institutions across the English-speaking world in various forms. The peer mentoring programme at BTI is in development: we have identified the need for our onsite and distance students and are attempting to address it by endorsing this type of support. The shift in mindset from knowledge receivers to knowledge creators must be made by students in order for them

to glean the real benefits of working alongside and learning from their peers. It is clear that students can boost their learning output and application of course material by increasing the amount of times they interact with the information, so peer mentoring is a programme with benefits for all participants.

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