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Building a Connected Community of Learners: The Postgraduate Peer Mentor Program

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Abstract

Student peer mentor programs are recognised as a valid component of a multi-faceted strategy to improve student engagement within higher education. This paper reports some preliminary results from research investigating how such programs help support diverse student needs in a multicultural environment.

Our results are from a study of a pilot postgraduate student peer mentoring program set up to support new students in the Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University, Australia. The postgraduate student body at Deakin is quite diverse and includes a large proportion of international students. We present examples to show how a peer mentoring program can improve the social engagement of students, help overcome cross-cultural communication barriers and contribute to the development of academic skills.

Key Words

Mentoring, Peer mentoring, Culture, International student

Background

There are many popular views about the relationships between cultural issues and student learning. For example, many academic staff in the West observe that a number of international students from Asia appear to be more reticent to participate in classroom activities. Another popular view is that students from some cultures appear to rely more on memory and rote learning. However, most recent studies such as Zhou, Knoke et al. 2005, Cheng 2000, Liu and Littlewood 1997, Ramburuth and McCormick 2001, seem to conclude that any differences in learning styles are not necessarily “bad” surface learning techniques (Watkins and Biggs 1996) and that there are differences between individual students such that it is dangerous to apply stereotypes. The observed differences between students from different cultures are more likely the result of cross cultural language and communication problems (Tran 2008, Xiao and Petraki 2007, Holmes 2006) or result from stress resulting from social issues such as social connectedness, homesickness and making friends (Brown and Holloway 2008, Rosenthal, Russell et al. 2007) or ‘academic shock’ - understanding the academic standards appropriate in the new country (Sovic 2008).

In this paper we explore how student peer mentoring programs can assist students in each of the areas mentioned above:

- Overcoming cross-cultural language and communication problems
- Overcoming ‘culture shock’ - stress resulting from social issues
- Overcoming ‘academic shock’ - understanding the academic standards appropriate in the new country

Student peer mentoring is widely used in many universities as a way of providing support for students. Student peer mentoring is a subset of peer mentoring in general which in turn is a sub-set of mentoring (Topping 2005). There is a vast literature at all levels. Here we concentrate mainly on the literature relating to cultural issues in student peer mentoring programs.

Terrion and Leonard 2007 provide the following definition of peer mentoring, based on Kram 1983: “*peer mentoring* is a helping relationship in which two individuals of similar age and/or experience come together, either informally or through formal mentoring schemes, in the pursuit of fulfilling some combination of functions that are career-related (e.g. information sharing, career strategizing) and psychosocial (e.g. confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, friendship).”

Student peer mentor programs support students in many ways, both mentors and new students (mentees). There are also benefits to staff and the university more generally. We discuss some of these below, but our primary focus is on the direct help provided by peer mentoring schemes that relates to cultural issues. The link to other benefits further down the track is the subject of ongoing research.

In this paper we will use the two-level classification of help developed by Kram 1985:

- Psychosocial help. This includes the ‘culture shock’/social issues discussed above
- Instrumental help. This includes the cross-cultural/communication and ‘academic shock’ issues discussed above.

This classification has been used, sometimes with slight refinements, by other researchers. Tenenbaum, Crosby et al. 2001 refer to psychosocial help as ‘emotional help’. Under this category we include help that relates to social aspects of life at university, not just social help relating to purely social issues. It relates to the affective components of learning (Vermunt and Vermetten 2004). Instrumental help is associated with cognitive aspects of learning. Under this category we include help associated with overcoming cross-cultural language or communication barriers and help for international students learning the academic standards appropriate in a new country. Table 1 lists the types of help

Table 1. Direct help provided by student peer mentoring schemes

Category	Help type
1. Psychosocial	<p>1.1. Creating social connections, friendships, etc. (Fox and Stevenson 2006).</p> <p>1.2. Helping new students adjust to aspects of university life, understanding timetables, development of IT skills, enrolment issues, etc. (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006, Treston 1999)</p> <p>1.3. Improving social skills (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006)</p>
2. Instrumental	<p>2.1. Academic support, including development of academic skills (Tenenbaum, Crosby et al. 2001, Clulow 2000, Weisz and Kemlo 2004). There is an overlap with peer tutoring and peer-assisted-learning programs (Smith 2008)</p> <p>2.2. Development of professional skills, leadership (Gilles and Wilson 2004, Glaser, Hall et al. 2006)</p> <p>2.3. Improving communication skills (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006, Terrion and Leonard 2007)</p>

Table 1 shows help provided by peer mentoring schemes to *all* students. In the findings section below we present examples that illustrate how a number of these work in situations where *culture* is an issue.

Many studies link help provided in peer mentor programs to long-term benefits for students and, staff and the university. Links to student learning outcomes can be made on theoretical grounds (Watkins and Biggs 1996). Some links to learning outcomes may be because students participating in peer mentoring programs are more confident, are more closely connected with the university and have reduced stress levels (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006, Fox and Stevenson 2006, Tinto 1993, Terrion and Leonard 2007, Allen, McManus et al. 1999). More recently, Sanchez, Bauer et al. 2006 showed that peer mentoring was related to student satisfaction with the university, (but inclusive results connecting mentoring with commitment, intention and actual behaviour with respect to graduation). Fox and Stevenson 2006 and Glaser, Hall et al. 2006 reported an improvement in the progression rate (number of units passed) and the average mark achieved by students who participated in mentor programs. Progression rate is a particular issue for international students (Reberger 2007). Mentors have reported that participation in peer mentoring increases their sense of satisfaction & self worth (Leung Mee-Lee and Bush 2003, Gilles and Wilson 2004, Heirdsfield, Walker et al. 2008).

Our program

Student cohort

The student peer mentoring program we use for our investigation is a one set up in the second half of 2007 for postgraduate students enrolled on campus in commerce courses at Deakin University in Australia. Over 3000 students are enrolled on campus in postgraduate courses at Deakin each semester, with a large proportion of the students international.

Program management and initial stages of program concept

One of the authors was appointed as a Program Manager of this peer mentor program in 2007 and asked to pilot a peer mentor program.

To ensure that the pilot was relevant to the needs of the Postgraduate student population in the Faculty, the program was developed in consultation with the Deakin Business School Society, a staff and student society supported within the Deakin Business School. Four students volunteered up to 8-10

hours of their time over a period of 6 weeks during later half of semester 2 2007. The program manager met weekly with these four students themselves a mix of gender and nationality to put together a program concept document which would form the basis of the program pilot.

The mentor program is designed to support student focused, social and academic transition for new postgraduate students during their first semester. Its aim is to provide a supportive environment where mentors share experiences with new students, on a regular basis. Mentors are current Deakin students who help new students become more aware of academic expectations, help new students develop time-management and independent learning skills and link new students into support services in the Faculty and across the University.

The four student volunteers also worked collaboratively to assist in the development of recruitment and marketing strategies of the program including using their own networks to 'spread the word' about the program.

A student peer-mentor coordinator was appointed from this initial group of four. Together the program manager and mentor coordinator designed the training, selected the mentors, matched mentees to mentors, and conducted evaluations of the program.

In the first semester of the pilot, the program catered to the entire semester cohort of commencing students which included 68 students. In semester 1 2008, the program catered to 120 students and in semester 2, 98 new students were supported. The decrease in numbers of new students supported was due to Mentors finding it too onerous to support four students, and as a result most mentors chose to support three students in semester 2.

Mentor selection and training

In the first semester (summer semester 07/08) the program involved approximately 21 mentors. In Semester 1 2008 the number of mentors grew to 30 and in Semester 2 this increased again to 33. A rigorous three-part selection process for mentors was used. The first step was an application process with a questionnaire. The second part entailed a 20 minute individual interview with both the Program Manager and Mentor co-ordinator. Part three was a full one-day training program. The aim of the program was to provide both a brief of the program and some skills development to mentors to build confidence and awareness of their own ability to manage whatever question or issues should arise within their new student group. Communicating clear expectations of their role and responsibilities within the program was extremely important to ensure consistency of support, information and referral being given to their new student groups.

Matching of mentors with mentees

A number of studies report advantages from matching mentees with mentors of the same cultural background (e.g. Weisz and Kemlo 2004, Ortiz-Walters and Gilson 2005). However, it is not essential to always match students in this way, and much of the literature on mentoring programs report benefits from cross-cultural matching (eg Bova 2000). In our program we usually matched on the same or similar course or discipline where possible. We did not, however, intentionally match students with students of the same gender (Budge 2006, Tenenbaum, Crosby et al. 2001). Mentors support between 1-4 mentees in any one semester. Mentors are asked after the training to advise the numbers of students they would like to mentor. On this basis, the Program Manager calculates the number of mentees that the program can support in its entirety.

It is interesting to note that the original four students who were involved in the development of the program concept insisted on small group mentoring with both diverse gender and nationality wherever possible. They clearly articulated the importance of creating opportunities to practise communication skills within diverse teams similar to that they might find in the classroom or later in the employment context.

The Drop-in-station

As part of our support program we introduced a drop-in centre for students. This centre is staffed by a number of our student mentors and was open for 2 hours on a daily basis, initially for the first six weeks and then extended to the entire semester. Through this centre students who may not have been assigned a mentor could obtain assistance of the type provided by a mentor. This includes students who arrived after the start of the semester, many of whom are in particular need of support. Some of the data reported below comes from activities in the drop-in centre, rather than mentor-mentee small groups.

Data

The data below are narratives of events or situations described to either the Program Manager or Mentor Coordinator during personal or email discussion, focus groups or as part of evaluations of the program. Names of students have been removed to ensure confidentiality.

Findings

We present examples of activities or incidents to illustrate how help provided in student peer mentoring programs (as listed in Table 1) can help overcome cultural issues.

Help type	Examples of activities or incidents
1. Psychosocial	
1.1. Creating social connections, friendships, etc.	<p>Mentors often report inviting their new students to their house to cook dinner together as a way of developing trust and rapport. In some instances close personal friendships have developed with new students introduced to mentors' personal networks. Some of the friendships have been maintained since the first semester in which the pilot was introduced.</p> <p>Mentors take their new students shopping to show them the best places to get the type of food they might be used to from their home country.</p> <p>Mentors often help with aspects of local culture that might be confusing for many new students. For example, recently a new student approached mentors in the Drop In centre about a biscuit they had just bought from a store that was well past its expiry date. This was not something the new student was familiar with. The mentors explained that the biscuit could be returned for a refund or replacement. One of the Mentors facilitated that by going to the store with him.</p>
1.2. Helping new students adjust to aspects of university life, understanding timetables, development of IT skills, enrolment issues, etc.	<p>Mentors are familiar enough with university practices to assist new students, or know who to go to for help. They will often help students post messages to their lecturer on the university learning management system.</p> <p>Connections with the rest of the university are developing. For example, recently the program manager was approached by a staff member concerned about a new student who was considering discontinuing his course. A mentor was assigned who met with the student. As a result of this connection, the student made some enrolment changes, attended a student society function and linked into some other students from the same home country.</p> <p>Mentors often facilitate connections with course advisors for their mentees, to get advice on transferring courses, credit transfer.</p>
1.3. Improving social skills	<p>New students often have difficulty in understanding how to interact with others socially; the mentor program can help students develop necessary skills. One example: a new student was unsure about how to approach an organisation about a missing membership card. Their mentor coached the new student about the importance of sounding confident and assertive. With the mentor's help, the new student contacted a representative in the organisation by telephone and the situation resolved satisfactorily.</p>

Help type	Examples of activities or incidents
2. Instrumental	
2.1. Academic support, including development of academic skills and meeting academic requirements and expectations.	<p>New students from different cultures often are unfamiliar with the independent learning style expected by many of their teachers. Mentors assist students to develop appropriate learning strategies such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning to appreciate that different people learn in different ways, and that teachers teach in different ways, too. • Accessing pod-casts on-line • Utilising lecturers' consultation times • Utilising services provided by the library
2.2. Development of professional skills, leadership	<p>It is not uncommon for students who were mentees in a prior semester becoming Mentors the next, reporting a desire to help others, make new friends, become more familiar with the new environment, and develop leadership skills and other interpersonal skills.</p>
2.3. Improving communication skills	<p>Mentors often advise mentees of the importance of attending lectures to practice listening skills.</p> <p>Advice from mentors of the importance of responding to emails with a simple 'okay', to help build rapport.</p> <p>Building awareness of cross-cultural communication issues:</p> <p>Mentors and mentees experience the phenomena of students from some cultures being reticent to talk or ask questions during meetings. The students learn appropriate strategies to help others with language problems and to build rapport in spite of these barriers.</p> <p>We have had instances where mentors have been able to connect with university staff to improve cross-cultural communication between staff and students.</p> <p>The mentor program has had a positive impact on the academic skills workshops run for students, with an increase in the number of students attending. Mentors recommend these services to mentees.</p>

Discussion, Conclusion and Further research

The findings provide preliminary evidence that peer mentoring can help overcome cultural issues that commonly impact students. The categories into which we have placed the examples are not new; we have simply highlighted how they relate to cultural issues.

The examples of activities or incidents that have occurred as part of this pilot peer mentoring program will help inform the development of similar programs, by suggesting activities that could be planned into such programs in future.

We have not yet thoroughly explored the impacts of the help provided through the peer mentoring program that might have on outcome measures, such as student satisfaction, student progression, retention, grades and other learning outcomes. However, we do have a considerable amount of anecdotal evidence of positive impacts. For example, some mentors have reported that the improvement to their cross-cultural communication skills provided through the program has assisted them in obtaining a full time position in their disciplinary area. This is, of course, one of the most significant ultimate impacts we can hope for. Future research will explore how various types of help link with or provide long-term benefits to students or the university.

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