RECAP Series

Paper 29

Peer Mentoring: Is there a place for it and how should it look? A Northumbria case study

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Introduction

The additional and increasingly diverse range of students now entering Higher Education (HE) means increased pressure on the availability of one-to-one contact time with staff, and students are expected to become more self-sufficient in their learning. This can work against a smooth transition from school to university and the change from a structured learning environment to one where study requirements are less well defined can be particularly difficult. Socially, large class sizes can also exacerbate the transition particularly for students who do not come with a school cohort (Hofmeister, 1998).

Peer mentoring is one method employed by many UK HE Institutions to assist in the integration of first year students into their discipline at university. The basis of the scheme is relatively simple in that more experienced students give support to new students with elements of academic and personal development. Bournemouth University, through a Funding for Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 3 project, host a comprehensive website reporting on the implementation of peer mentoring based programmes in a number of UK universities.

Bournemouth University's collection of reviews, research and case studies on peer mentoring illustrate how universities have found peer mentoring as effective in:

- improving the first year experience of students. (e.g. Watson, 2000; Farrell et al., 2004);
- increasing student retention (e.g. Boud et al., 1999; Packham & Miller, 2000);
- improving achievement; with some suggesting peer mentoring users gain higher mean grades than non-users (e.g. Congos & Schoeps, 1993; Kenney & Kallison, 1994).

Thus peer mentoring has the potential to fulfil a central role as a support mechanism to counteract issues such as high staff: student ratios, the level of resource available and the increasing diversity of today's HE students.

Peer Mentoring as an initiative relies heavily upon active student participation and thus is dependent ultimately upon the students' willingness to engage fully in the process. Peer mentoring is therefore a highly complex, dynamic and interpersonal relationship that requires time, interest and commitment of mentors and mentees. Although successfully implemented by a number of UK Universities, attempts to introduce traditional models at Northumbria have had mixed fortunes, the most negative aspect being a lack of engagement from mentees. Therefore this research aimed to firstly identify whether there was a demand for peer mentoring from the students, secondly if a demand could be established what were the academic needs which could be addressed by a peer mentoring model and finally, given the previous lack of engagement what potential alternative(s) were there to the traditional face-to-face format?

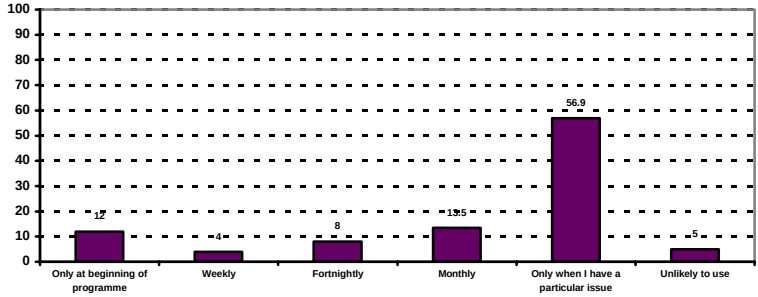
Methodology

Following a literature search, key statements pertaining to mentoring were derived and incorporated into a short questionnaire. Over 300 questionnaires were returned from 232 females and 77 male students, 50% of the students were from the North East of England, 32% were from other parts of the UK; 13% were international students from outside the EU; and 4% were from EU member countries. 42.4% of the respondents were first year students. Ten students volunteered to be interviewed. Of these, one was an international student and one was a student with disabilities. Nine were undergraduates and one a postgraduate. Questionnaire returns and interview data was considered to be a good representation of a typical Northumbria student body.

Demand for Peer Mentoring

It was immediately evident from questionnaire responses there was a clear demand for peer mentoring as a concept. However, it was also apparent that the traditional face-to-face contact model was not viewed as being necessary, with only a third of respondents feeling this was required. Furthermore, questionnaire respondents indicated that access to a peer mentoring model would be likely to be piecemeal (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Frequency of contact with peer mentors



In one model researched by Freeman and Kelton (2004), face-to-face meetings with mentors were supplemented by email contact with either a mentor or fellow mentees. In addition new students could access the entire cohort in the peer mentoring programme via an online discussion forum should they wish wider access to students who might know and help them sort through issues of orientation i.e. virtual support.

We explored with respondents the idea of the main peer contact, being on a virtual basis rather than the supplemental basis outlined in Freeman and Kelton's study, over three quarters of respondents (77.2%) felt that this would be satisfactory. However, as clearly expressed by a number of respondents some form of initial face-to-face contact was still seen as very desirable element.

> *"If somehow at the beginning, say there was a room where it would just be people from your course and from the year above, and you could just go along and there would be a handful of people, and you*

> *could just chat to them once, and they would hand out a list of say their mobile numbers…and it would then be up to you if you ever had a problem, if you gave them a ring… it should…be kept like that, on a fairly informal basis."*

Participants were presented with a brief definition of peer mentoring as part of the questionnaire and the role of the mentor was explored by a number of statements such as, whether:

- a peer mentor should be on the same programme as themselves;
- it would it be useful to have a mentor for each module;
- one or two mentors who could be contacted about anything would be sufficient;
- they would prefer to select their own peer mentor;
- they would need to meet face-to-face with any peer mentors on a regular basis;
- the sessions with a peer mentor should be part of their programme's timetable.

It is the operational factors such as those above which, within existing literature, cause the greatest concern (Long, 1997). For example, Lacey (1999) noted that matching of participants is an important issue in initiating a mentoring scheme. In addition, Lacey (1999) along with Armstrong et al (2002) advocate partners' self-selection, indicating that where there is freedom to choose, the outcome will be more successful; assigned relationships are "superficial alliances" at best. In

Northumbria University's research, respondents appeared to be slightly undecided as to whether module specialists and their own personal selection of a mentor was necessary where percentage of respondents agreeing with the statements being 46.6 and 49.8 respectively.

Matching and self selection of mentors was also a minor issue for the interviewees with only one or two mentioning choice and this was generally based on gender or ethnicity:

> *"I'm a girl, so I would want my mentor to be a girl, to feel safe, and also, the same nationality as me would be best, because when students first arrive, they don't really know much about English. If someone can speak the same language as them, maybe they can help more*."

However, it was clear from the responses that students felt that it was very important for the peer mentor to come from the same programme as themselves with 82.3% (36% strongly) agreeing with this statement. In addition a high proportion (84.9%) indicated that a small number of mentors whom they could contact about anything would be useful.

The strong preference for a programme connection was expanded upon by volunteer interviewees:

> *"I would appreciate somebody who was on my course, because they differ so much … it wouldn't really have been much use if it had been say in Sciences, when I do English and after that, its kind of a complex*

> *thing… there are people who are at University to have fun, and there are people who are at University to do work. And the people who are there to work wouldn't necessarily appreciate a mentor who was there to have fun and vice versa…they're not going to know the right things. It's a very difficult thing to match up."*

When asked whether sessions with a peer mentor should be part of their programme's timetable [i.e. formalised], a slight majority agreed rather than disagreed (55% vs. 45%). Contradicting to some extent their own views on anticipated contact as illustrated in Figure 1. Similar splits of opinion were apparent in the interviews:

> *"It either needs to be done fully, or not at all… needs to be supervised as opposed to just being casual. Otherwise you get into a situation where a student comes to rely on his mentor to submit an assignment or finish his assignment to the best of his ability. The mentor is not available, or can't be bothered, because there's either not enough motivation for him to be there, or there are time limits or whatever. It needs to be almost as if the mentor is a tutor, and there's a set date every couple of weeks or every week, when he is made available*."

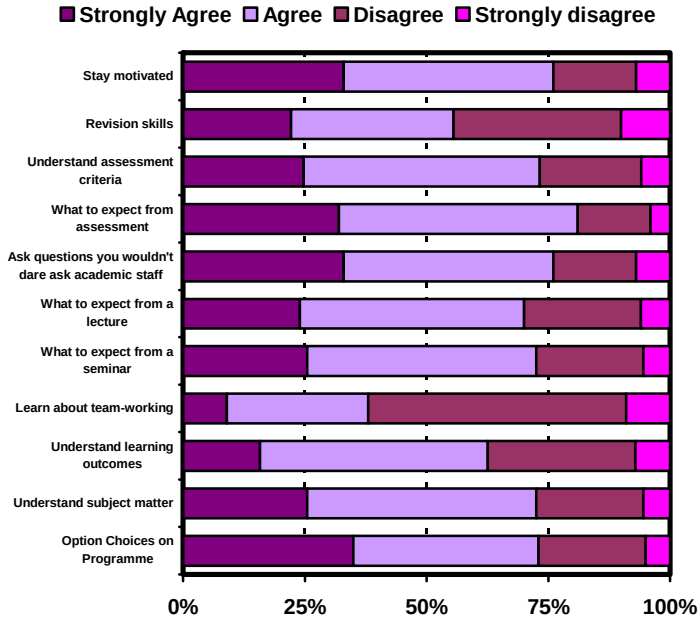
> *"I'd prefer it to be fairly informal, like contacting your peer mentor through e-mails. Just when you want to talk to them, and not have to meet them like once a week. It would be better just to e-mail them*

> *if you had a question you wanted to ask them, rather than have to meet them, like at a certain time each week or each month."*

The findings above establish that there is a demand for peer mentoring as a support model. However, it is clear that within this the notion of programme identity was strong but apart from an initial meeting face-to-face contact was not deemed necessary and a mainly virtual model able to be accessed on a "needs" basis would be sufficient. Therefore for the study's second aim the desired content was explored.

The academic needs of peer mentoring were the main focus of the questionnaire and questions covered areas such as option choices, subject matter, seminars, lectures, learning outcomes, assessment (& criteria), revision, teamwork, motivation and questions (possibly academic) that they could ask a mentor but that they would be afraid to ask academic staff. Responses to these statements are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Students responses to peer mentor assistance on academic issues



In all but one case, concerned with team working, the majority of respondents agreed that assistance from more experienced students would be useful. In some areas such as staying motivated and assessment expectations more than three quarters of students would appreciate the input of experienced students. Notably, 76% of students (33% strongly) had questions they would prefer to ask experienced students rather than to academic staff. This was something picked up on in a peer mentoring scheme at Manchester by Coe (1999) where students welcomed a forum in which to discuss

problems they would feel uncomfortable talking to a personal tutor about.

Therefore it was clear that many of the aspects already covered in traditional models are indeed desirable to continue providing within any virtual model proposal.

Virtual mentor models

The first obvious alternative model for consideration is whether a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), commonly used to support learning and teaching, could be utilised. Evidence from a concurrent study at Northumbria which established an informal student feedback group on VLE use suggested some potential

> *"I use eLP (the VLE) to allow me to interact with other students and lecturers via the discussion boards and it often helps when I am struggling with work especially when I know others are also finding it difficult."*

However, a number of negative comments were received

> *"I found that the eLP was not very exciting to the typical student that feels they have better things to do with their time."*
>
> *"Students use the eLP just because their tutors ask them to do it. They do not use it on their own initiative …"*

Conventional VLEs are more concerned with content and consumption (Downes, 2007) – institutional control being unable to facilitate or engage with social

communities of informal and impromptu learning (O'Hear, 2008).

However, evidence suggests access to social networking sites is a day to day occurrence (Bausch and Han, 2006). A social networking site is defined as one with profiles, regular commentary on those profiles with a varying but publicly available social network (Boyd 2006a). As noted by Tufekci (2008) multiple US studies have found that significant proportions of students (>80%) have a profile on such sites, with Facebook and MySpace being the more common examples. Tufekci's own research, carried out on a diverse population of first year undergraduates, found that around half considered themselves to be heavy users of such sites.

Social networking sites and their role within the students learning experiences are becoming of increasing interest due to the perceived alignment with social-cultural theories of learning (Licaardi et al., 2007). Many commentators (Cain, 2008; Phipps, 2008) have noted the potential for social software applications to create social learning environments that offer 'social communities of practice' – and a recent JISC project has begun investigating the potential of such social software applications in supporting student learning and engagement.

However, Kolek and Sauders (2008) note how a number of US University's have increasing concerns in relation to Social Network Sites. In their own study which analysed student use of Facebook, it was revealed that only small proportions of students restrict access to their individual postings on the University Network. Many students gave full disclosure of personal information including photographs. It was observed that many of these

individual postings could have *"potential negative consequences for individual students"* amplified by US media cases of sexual assault, stalking etc. and a number of photographs displayed i.e. alcohol fuelled could cause *"potential damage to an institution's image."* In a separate study Lipka (2007) additionally comments on the complex difficulties which can arise through Facebook relationships, in particular staff: student connections. Firstly, it was noted how students expressed the view that the site was their domain and as such needed free expression without worrying what "professors" might think and secondly, staff noted instances where students expect special privileges in the name of being a Facebook "friend".

In terms of using Facebook for student support, Miller and Jensen (2007)'s study of libraries' utilisation of Facebook concluded that they needed "*to put information in front of the Facebook user"* and suggested My Profile; Notes and Posted Items; Albums and Events were four key aspects of Facebook which need to be utilised to "*grab the students' attention"*.

In order to offset potential personal dangers and the reflection of some student entries on an institution, Kolek and Saunders (2008) recommend that institutions at the very least *"should develop clear policies and procedures for the use of Facebook and other social networking sites in (the name of) official institutional business"* as well as use the induction process to warn students of the dangers of personal disclosure. However, if institutions begin to consider policies in relation to social network site use, students may begin to view the legitimate educational uses the university does support as imposed

and hence suffer from the same negativity as the increasing current view of VLE use.

The group basis on which social networking sites like Facebook operate, as suggested by Miller and Jensen (2007), focus on predefined activity as opposed to learning within a community. In traditional models of peer mentoring, the mentors have at least one full year of experience at University. However, if considering a basic dictionary definition of a mentor as 'a wise giver of advice', a student could pass on advice arising from their own personal discoveries at any time. Could a 'personal learning environment' (Downes, 2007) be a more appropriate platform for a peer mentoring model, and could the Second Life Grid offer a suitable community based 'personal learning environment' able to create a 'learning network' (Downes, 2007) that enables social and collaborative peer support.

Cheal (2007) has pronounced "*that Second Life is not simply the latest online fad, but part of a continuum of instructional technology tools that corresponds to twentieth and twenty-first century developments in educational theory."* Several UK Universities have purchased land within the Second Life Grid to host their own support and learning environments (Shepard, 2008); the basis of purchase being that the fantasy environment will allow real academic freedom for discussion. As quoted by Shepard (2008), Gilly Salmon, Professor of e-learning, University of Leicester, believes that with the use of Second Life avatar characters "*there are not going to be the usual discrimination issues of the face-to-face environment…the student and the teacher are on the same level."*

Conclusion and Future Research

The traditional face-to-face peer mentoring model has had limited success at Northumbria. However, as this paper reports, research with students established that there was a demand for peer mentoring but that such demand was for 'needs-based' access to a mentor and that virtual contact with a mentor would be readily accepted although initial face-to-face access was desirable. Students made reference to academic needs for advice from more experienced students on option choices, subject matter, seminars, lectures, learning outcomes, assessment (& criteria), revision, teamwork and motivation.

The virtual learning environment, known as the eLP, at Northumbria, offered one virtual platform for mentoring since it is used regularly by students. However, it lacks excitement and its use is directed by tutors and focussed on a repository role rather than that of a learning community.

Social networking sites such as Facebook are heavily used by first year undergraduates – the target group for peer mentoring – and have popular appeal. Whilst they are used for social activities, they do align with social-cultural learning theories. However, their potential for misuse and abuse indicates a necessity to introduce policies regarding usage. The introduction of rules and regulations to the use of Facebook is likely to have a negative impact on students who may resent the appropriation of one of their mechanisms for socialising by the institution.

Personal learning environments such as Second Life are increasingly being used by academic institutions. They offer a fantasy environment which has the potential to afford users academic freedom and break down barriers between academic staff and students, mentors and mentees. Currently Second Life is less familiar to students than Facebook so there is potential for academic staff and student mentors to introduce the facility to mentees rather than for students to feel that their social environment has been trespassed upon.

The authors intend to further explore these alternative models of virtual peer mentoring to establish which has the greatest potential for supporting students at Northumbria University. Research will involve setting up pilot mentoring models based on the different platforms and analysing the resultant communications.

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