The Evolution of Peer Mentoring at the University of Western Sydney

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Abstract.

Peer mentoring has been conducted at what is now known as the University of Western Sydney (UWS) since 1995. It began by following the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model very closely, but has evolved over the eleven years since its inception in order to accommodate more closely the specific subject and student needs of the institution. While the programs have enjoyed success in terms of the academic outcomes of the mentees and the reported outcomes of the mentors, they have also succeeded in spreading the systemised integration of collaborative learning through the institution. Although peer mentoring at UWS offers academic support, it is not tutoring. Mentors facilitate academic group discussion and the focus is on collaborative discussion among mentees. Despite the academic success of the program, the funding and timetabling arrangements continue to be challenges which need to be addressed. However, as the history of the programs demonstrates, the challenges and issues which have arisen at the University of Western Sydney, while
not unique to UWS, have helped shape the programs and have led to some unexpected yet beneficial outcomes.

Introduction

In 1995, the Student Services of what was then the University of Western Sydney – Nepean (UWS-Nepean) commenced a peer mentor program which was an adaptation of the Supplemental Instruction (SI) program developed by Martin and Arendale (1993). It was commenced “in an attempt to enhance the academic, personal and social adjustments of our students to university” (Tiernan & Shores, unpublished, p.3) and was seen as suitable because many of the students came from backgrounds where university study was unfamiliar. Since then, little has changed in terms of the university’s demographics. UWS is located in one of the most industrially and culturally diverse regions in Australia with a large percentage of its population coming from a low socio economic background (Reid, 2003). It is also the largest growing area of Sydney (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001), yet only 10.5 percent of adults in the Greater Western Sydney region have a university degree compared with 20.8% for the rest of Sydney (Reid, 2003).

The peer mentoring program has continued throughout these last eleven years, and research (Krause, 2005b) suggests that university students Australia-wide want peer support. Students ranked peer support as the fourth most important criterion for a quality university experience and reported that peer support helped them to feel they belonged (Krause, 2005b) in the university community.

Research supports the attainment of higher grades as a direct result of peer mentor engagement (Peat, Dalziel & Grant, 2001). More recently, Glaser, Hall and Halperin (2006) have reported yet more successful outcomes for students involved in their version of peer mentoring at the University of New South Wales. UWS has also experienced various successes with their individual peer mentoring programs for mentors and mentees alike (Power and Handa, 2005). However, as a result of the longevity of the programs here at UWS, we are also now seeing much wider, though
less easily quantifiable, benefits to the organisation as a whole and to the work of Student Services within the organisation.

The experience of mentoring and of being mentored develops a sense of collegiality among students who consequently feel more positive about their learning. They also feel a sense of connection (Krause, 2005a) to the university community. For the program to run successfully cooperation between academic and training staff as well as cooperation between groups of students is essential. This cooperative and collaborative ethos of the program positively affects the overall climate of the university (Shores & Tiernan, 1996) and its focus on student learning.

However, despite this benefit and regardless of the longevity of peer mentoring at UWS, it still faces challenges some of which are ongoing. An exploration of these challenges, along with suggestions to help ameliorate them, is provided with a view to sharing the insights, benefits and difficulties of long term peer mentoring programs and to further the discussion begun by Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2001) and Glaser, Hall and Halperin (2006).

**Peer Mentoring at UWS**

Peer mentoring began in 1995 at UWS-Nepean based on the principles of Supplemental Instruction (SI), the program introduced by Martin and Arendale (1993) which has proven internationally successful in the retention of first year students and in improving grade point averages (Martin and Arendale, 1994). At UWS peer mentoring is now run by the Learning Skills Unit and Counselling Staff from Student Support Services (previously known as Student Services) with input from Faculties/Schools in whose subjects the program is conducted. The program is supported by a Contact Lecturer’s Manual (2003), a Trainer’s Manual (2003) and a Student Peer Mentor Training Workbook (2003), all developed by the UWS Peer Mentors’ Trainers’ Group after years of experience and evaluation.

Over the years there has been increased interest in peer mentoring at UWS following its ongoing success. Staff from Student Support Services at UWS have implemented
peer mentoring programs in accordance with the SI model as well as having developed variations of this model to meet the specific requirements of individual Faculties/Schools or individual lecturing staff.

At different times in the history of peer mentoring at UWS, the variations have included a ‘Specific-Focus Variant’, an ‘Orientation Variant’, an ‘Engineering Variant’, an ‘Economic Variant’ and an ‘Industrial Design and Engineering Variant’. Other variants have been developed but discontinued after one trial for lack of fit. All of these variants were adaptations of SI to meet the needs of the specific student cohort being targeted. The level of Student Services involvement was dependent upon the resources available and the source of the funding. However, Student Services at all times had full responsibility for the training of the mentors as well as for consultations and advice on the administration of the program.

For example, the Specific – Focus Variant involved conducting weekly mentoring sessions for a period of approximately three weeks prior to a major assignment or final exam. To avoid the session becoming overly focused on the content of the assignment it proved useful to provide mentors with a range of specific, subject related prompt questions and other materials.

The Orientation Variant was “conducted in first year, first semester core subjects studied by newly enrolling students...[involving]... weekly mentoring session, for each week up until the Easter break” (Tiernan and Shores, unpublished, p.4). This variant has been further amended so that now it is dislocated from any one particular subject but is still conducted for groups of students studying within the one degree. It is now referred to as the Acculturation Program.

Learning Development Programs are another variant. These are usually run in the second semester and have a focus on content and collaborative learning. Their aim is to assist first year students develop deeper levels of learning. Activities likely to be included in these sessions are: deconstructing difficult readings, identifying main ideas from a lecture, summarising lecture notes and developing answers for practice exam questions. The length of the mentoring varies according to the perceived needs
of students and may be from four to eight meetings but are usually of five weeks duration.

The Engineering Variant which was operational 1999-2000 was administered and funded by the School of Engineering. The Kingswood-based Mathematics Learning Advisor from Student Support Services was involved in a training and consulting role. “This school decided to introduce a mentor program for the first year engineering students, which aimed to target all first year engineering students in the school… all first year Civil and Environmental Engineering students were allocated to a group which was to meet with a mentor once a week for 1/2 hour. The mentors were third year students who had been invited by the coordinator to become part of this mentor group” (Armstrong, 2003). This was the first instance of any notion of compulsion in association with the peer mentoring program and while the Student Services staff held reservations over this, it was soon clear that the compulsion was limited to initial attendance and the program succeeded and flourished (Shrestha, 1999). Programs of this type, that is, those with a compulsory component, are now referred to as ‘embedded’ to denote the extent to which they are contextualised within a degree and the notion of compulsion plays a part in these programs. This program evolved into the Industrial Design and Engineering Variant an ambitious program which is part of a multi-pronged approach to improving retention in a particular degree program. It involves conducting a mentoring program alongside direct teaching interventions by the Learning Advisors and consultations between Student Services and Faculties/School staff over the restructuring of assignments and subjects within a degree (Farrell, Power & Salter, 2005).

The Economics Variant was a program in which the Student Services staff involvement was limited to training and advising. However, the program was funded and conducted by the Economics staff and the training was conducted so that the mentors were made aware of their responsibilities as students, the responsibilities of the staff and the boundaries of these roles.

While not all of these variants are continuing, and while some have been more successful than others, their development, administration and evaluation over the eleven years since the inception of peer mentoring at UWS, have provided a legacy of
organisational learning and productive collaborations that extend beyond the individual students involved in the programs as mentors and as mentees and beyond the staff of Student Services.

The collaborative nature of the peer mentoring program presents opportunities for Learning Skills Unit and Counselling staff to work together as well as to work with academics from various schools. The pedagogical insights resulting from involvement in the program are not confined to the trainers (the LSU and Counselling staff) but are also enjoyed by those Faculty/School based lecturers who are involved in the program and “engage in the discourse of mentoring” (Power & Handa, 2005). In their reflective discussions with the coordinators of the program many school-based lecturers have reported that the benefits of their involvement in peer mentoring have been “a positive influence” on their practice as teachers at the university. They also report that it has given them insight into the issues related to their first year students’ academic and acculturation needs. The nature of the program in which coordinators, trainers and academics indulge in the “collective, self-reflective enquiry” into their practice (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p.5) can provide them with continuous professional development opportunities (Power & Handa, 2005). The reflective practice that is encouraged by their involvement in the program can bring about learning which occurs not only at an individual level but also at the organisational level, for example, the development of a resource book for use within a subject on the basis of feedback from mentees (Farrell, Power & Salter, 2005). However, despite the advantages of these programs, they have not been without their issues and challenges, some of which are ongoing.

**Issues, Challenges and Recommendations**

While there are a number of areas that could be considered challenging for the peer mentor programs at UWS, the two areas which have had the biggest impact on the program are those of Funding and Other Resources and of Time and Timetabling.

**Funding and Other Resources**
As for many institutions, UWS is currently in a funding restraint position and this has had an impact on the entire university, from position freezes and redundancies right through to restricted program funding. Peer mentoring has only ever been given minimal funding through the university’s equity budget, insufficient to provide payments to mentors based on hourly rates. This has meant that the coordination has always been a part of a Learning Advisor’s job, as has involvement in the training, monitoring and evaluation of the program for all Learning Advisors and Counsellors involved in the program.

This has therefore meant that the programs are running, as they have for eleven years under the threat that “funding can always dry up” and “of being shut down by budget controllers who need convincing” (Murray, 2006, p.5) about the value of these programs, especially when those Faculty/School staff with whom Student Services staff have worked move positions or leave the university. This also raises the question of how big the program will be each year and how much time will need to be found to conduct it.

Murray (2006, p.5) warns that unless there is a “clear and ongoing funding mechanism” these programs will not survive and he suggests three sources of funds for peer mentoring; from within the course in which the program runs, from the Faculty/School and finally outside sponsorship from industry. While peer mentoring at UWS continues, it has remained a fringe program largely as a result of the funding situation.

However, surprisingly, this has not had entirely negative outcomes. Once the program was seen to be successful by Faculties/Schools, they wanted to implement it in their degree programs and a few Faculties/Schools even provided their own funds for a peer mentoring program to suit their specific needs. While the provision of the funding meant that they retained effective control over the program, they sought assistance from Student Support Services in the implementation and design of their programs. This situation led to highly collaborative working relationships, with the Faculty/School staff informing themselves of the program’s aims and objectives and working to support the program in terms of timetabling, recruitment and support of mentors. At times the programs moved in directions that Student Support Services
would not have initiated, but the ongoing discussions over the advantages and disadvantages to student learning that various program options would result in, have led to a wider sharing of knowledge and understandings concerning student learning.

**Time and Timetabling**

This challenge has a large impact on the program by influencing the level of involvement of students. It operates from the mentors’, the mentees’ and the Faculties’/Schools’ points of view.

Today’s “universities are no longer a hanging out place for most students any more” (Handa, 2004, p.6) and they are spending fewer hours on campus (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). Students either do not come to university every day or cannot afford to stay on the campus for the whole day. Their hours are limited and full of other commitments which can be more pressing than a voluntary mentoring session. The reason for this shift seems to be that most students have jobs, families and other commitments and “university is only a small part of their lives and they spend only the hours they have to on campus…losing opportunities for close engagement with the learning process” (DEST, 2005).

Moreover mentors themselves are not time-flexible enough to offer sessions on a day or at a time when most first years are available and on campus. The most ideal time would be just after the lecture or their tutorial. Again finding a physical space that they can book in those time slots when they are able to offer sessions can also be problematic.

Satisfactory timetabling arrangements which suit both mentees and mentor are very difficult to achieve especially in the voluntary attendance programs. Some peer mentors express concern when they are unable to establish groups due to logistical problems such as timetable clashes between mentees and the mentor. In a voluntary program, students self select into mentoring programs. Many choose not to participate despite encouragement from faculty staff, which may mean that mentors who have
completed training are unable to establish a group. This challenge is one of the reasons for some Faculties'/Schools’ motivations to make mentoring compulsory and embed it in the degree program. This gives staff the opportunity to request time and space at the university planning level in which the program can operate.

The challenge of time and timetabling also impacts on the monitoring and support of the program. As per the SI principles, a debrief session for the mentors is an important aspect of their own development (Armstrong, 2003). In most peer mentoring programs running at UWS each mentor gets an opportunity to attend a debrief session with one of the peer mentoring trainers during the semester usually in the third or the fourth week of their mentoring sessions. It is also an opportunity for mentors (usually a group is invited with one of the trainers facilitating) to get together and have an opportunity to share their experiences with one another and to reflect on and debrief their experiences so far. Another purpose of this session is to give support and advice to the mentors about any issues they might be having. Predictably with timetable clashes and multiple demands on mentors’ time it is becoming difficult for these sessions to take place in this form. In practice mentors usually make individual appointments to attend debriefing with a trainer. Sometimes even this does not take place and an email or a questionnaire replaces a face to face meeting. Time and timetabling issues are compounded by the equity issue of conducting peer mentoring over six campuses.

Other Issues, Challenges and Recommendations

Due to geographical distances as well as funding and staff restrictions, the peer mentor trainers have had to work strategically to maximise their impact and this has meant that some opportunities have had to be bypassed. For instance, during a two day training program, trainers build a relationship with mentors due to the highly interactive and sharing nature of the program. By the conclusion of the two day program a level of trust and friendship has developed among mentors and between mentors and trainers but these synergies are not generally exploited during the semester mentoring program. Once the training sessions are over, it is generally left to the coordinators to provide support. Yet research suggests that follow up should be supportive and contribute to a student friendly environment (Thomas & Yorke, 2003).
cited in Krause 2005a). During training students are invited to meet with any of the
trainers if they wish to debrief/raise concerns outside the normal debrief period.
However, this offer is generally not taken up and as trainers, we could support
mentors better by formalising more ‘open door’ opportunities for discussion and
resolution of mentors’ concerns.

Another lost opportunity has to do with utilising input from past mentors. While many
students mentor during their final year/semester of their program, there are a
significant number of students, who mentor in their second year of study. Many of
these students may be available for mentoring in later semesters or for assisting in
other discipline areas where there is a shortfall of mentors. Another under utilised
group are the mentors trained for voluntary programs some of whom are not able to
form a mentoring group. If the expertise of these mentors was utilised, it may enhance
the variety and depth of the program and assist in the development of a culture of peer
mentoring which to date has not permeated through the university despite its ten year
history at UWS.

Another area where strategic decisions over the use of resources needs to be made is
the training program. Traditionally at UWS, training has taken place over 2 days
using an experiential approach (Shores & Tiernan, 1996). The first day has been
dedicated to exposure to the model and a structured introduction to implementing it.
The second day has been dedicated to the students attempting to mentor groups. This
has proven effective in both having students make the emotional and practical shift
between tutoring and mentoring and it has also proven effective in culling students
who are not suitable to act as mentors, as they frequently self-select out on the second
day. However, there has recently been a reduction in the length of mentor training
from two to one day for embedded programs. The rationale is that mentors themselves
have experienced mentoring, and the topics to be covered in mentoring sessions are
set by the first year academic coordinator of the Unit. Another reason for adapting to
one day training, is that students are seen as time poor and a one day training reduces
the time commitment of mentors and a reduced commitment may attract some
volunteers who would not participate in a longer program. However, some of the
trainers report that a one day training does not seem to allow students to absorb the
philosophy of mentoring, nor does it allow adequate time to practise mentoring
techniques to a level where a new mentor can feel comfortable in the role. A two day training is also valuable as some students (those who may not be comfortable in the mentoring role) self-select out of the program by choosing not to attend the second day.

The level of academic involvement, understanding and support has a large impact on the success of the voluntary programs. In the voluntary programs, there are times when not many of the target group attend mentoring sessions because of lack of support from Faculty/School lecturers who fail to promote peer mentoring in their lectures. In a climate where most first years are already juggling many duties and their motivations and expectations from their lecturers are “tell us what we need to do, [and] we’ll do it” (Ottewill and Macfarlane, 2003, p. 34) the role that their lecturers’ support can play in promoting the program and encouraging first year students to go along to these sessions is crucial.

Faculties’ other main area of impact is the recruitment of mentors. Usually students who are invited to participate in the peer mentoring training are recommended as potential mentors by their lecturers. Most of these students are selected for their academic achievements and are not chosen for their learning strategies or communication skills. In this way students who might have developed good study techniques over time or students who have strong people skills essential for effective mentoring are not invited as they may not have a credit or distinction in their subject. It also means that some students who may not be suitable for the role become mentors. It is therefore very important for some kind of recruitment and selection process to be put in place in which potential mentors show and prove how they are suitable for this role.

A final challenge to the peer mentor programs at UWS is the management of quality control. A disadvantage of embedded peer mentoring can be that large mentee groups challenge new mentors. Mentors who feel challenged by a large group can co-present mentoring sessions by negotiating among their peers or requesting a shared group. However, for other mentors a larger group provides a critical mass of students which allows for improved social interaction among mentees. In addition the one day of
training offered to mentors participating in embedded programs may not allow sufficient time for students to mature into the role and develop the skill of peer mentoring.

Lastly, quality control is also influenced by the nature of the relationship between the mentors and the university. In the absence of ongoing funding an employer-employee relationship cannot be established. This has the potential to create difficult situations should mentors disregard suggestions on how to fulfil their role.

**Conclusion**

Peer mentoring at UWS has continued now for eleven years and while it does not always follow the pure SI model which was its inspiration, it has successfully evolved to suit specific UWS contexts and has helped spread the systemised integration of collaborative learning throughout the institution.

Peer mentoring can occur at UWS on six campuses in any one semester. This situation not only puts significant pressure on coordinators and other trainers, it can mean that mentors feel unsupported or isolated. The rationale for this wide coverage is equity concerns and is often in response to lecturer request. The dilemma is whether to continue to spread resources thinly or whether it may in fact be preferable to restrict the program in order to provide comprehensive support of mentors, mentees and Faculty/School staff throughout the mentoring experience.

In dealing with the challenges specific to UWS, those involved in peer mentoring have found the following helpful in ameliorating the ongoing difficult situations outlined above:

A small number of trainers take an active role in liaising with lecturers to ensure they see the importance of their involvement in the training. In some circumstances where a lecturer can not attend for the ‘Meet the Lecturers’ (during the second day of training) session it may be necessary for a facilitator to take a more active role liaising with the lecturer to ensure a smooth transition to the sessional program. Perhaps an
experienced mentor, after discussion with the lecturer could undertake this role if necessary.

Trainers should be encouraged to commit not just to training but to providing ongoing support for the duration of the mentoring program to the mentors and the lecturers who have implemented peer mentoring. Sessional support for mentors and lecturers could be trialled in a pilot program and expanded as personnel become available.

Many of the challenges raised above are not unique to UWS and are of concern for other institutions attempting to provide quality student support. Since many universities in the Sydney area also participate in peer mentoring or similar programs, it may be helpful for the trainers from the various Sydney institutions to establish joint discussions regarding experiences, concerns and best practices of mentoring. While each institution has its own specific challenges, a collaboration across the Sydney region could provide all participants with useful benchmarking insights and synergies.

Postscript

Since the completion and submission of this paper, the new pro Vice Chancellor (Academic) has announced a trial of PASS at UWS in five subjects. Mentors will be paid at $20.00 per hour. This is a pilot program aimed at reddressing attrition and high failure rates and if successful, this program will become the university’s peer mentoring program.
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