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Working outside the box: breaking down barriers with a Learning Development Peer Mentor scheme

Sheryl Mansfield
University of Northampton, UK

Sam Thomas
University of Northampton, UK

Presentation abstract

Peer learning is simply described as students from similar social groupings helping each other to learn (Topping, 2007). A recent document by the European Centre for Supplemental Instruction-Peer Assisted Study Sessions (SI PASS) (2019) highlighted that 32 universities in the UK provide a system of peer support, and these vary both in how they operate and their nomenclature: schemes could be framed as peer assisted learning, peer assisted study sessions or peer mentoring. Our aim was to create a supplementary, peer-led service which provides students with engaging, timely guidance and develops effective learning relationships based on parity and equality (Collier, 2015). We decided to use a similar approach to the Student Learning Assistant model of Price et al. (2019), where the Learning Development (LD) Mentors offer support to students from any disciplinary subject.

Eight students were recruited and funded to offer peer support to all students within the institution. All are current second- and third-year students who work four hours per week supplementing the LD provision via a daily drop-in as well as leading ongoing projects and tasks, including resource development and evaluation. A key driver is reaching students who do not currently use the LD provision by developing resources in physical spaces and digital platforms previously unused in our work (e.g., in student halls and using platforms like Discord and TikTok). We will offer a perspective on the benefits and issues encountered when working with LD mentors, evaluate how the role was co-created with the students and assess the impact it has had on wider student engagement.

Community response

In its inclusion of the student mentors as presenters, this session exemplifies the ALDinHE values of working alongside students and making HE inclusive through emancipatory practice, partnership working, and collaboration. The emphasis on collaboration with peer mentors to develop support for students was impressive – examples like using Discord and TikTok to raise awareness among students, or re-developing the plagiarism course to make it more relevant, demonstrated the importance of embedding the student voice into learning development activity. The student perspective was thus crucial to increasing student engagement with LD and with HE in general.

The success of this project demonstrates the importance of embedding the student voice into learning development activities. This has prompted me to consider our new peer mentor programme and how this programme could support and raise awareness for the Academic Skills Hub (based in the library and staffed by Learning Development practitioners) more effectively.

Next steps and additional questions

It is useful to consider and reflect on what we mean by 'the student voice' and how we envision this as integral to LD for the future. The value of co-creating programmes of support in partnership with paid student members of staff is self-evident but how can we build on this going forwards? How can we, as a sector, retain an authentic partnership which grants a creative role to learners but is also designed to support, empower, and facilitate learning in an inclusive and accessible way? What role should technology play in enabling us to retain and develop these all-important partnerships?

Authors' reflection

Having the student mentors present and offering their perspectives on the scheme was vital and they did an excellent job! The student mentors developed and undertook most of the work, and they were able to address technical questions about the project in respect to producing content for social media. For example, they spoke about a series of TikTok

videos they produced to introduce students to the Learning Hub building and explain how to access the booking system. The mentors provide a different perspective and offer a different point of connection to the students compared to our regular Learning Development provision.

It was great to share our initiative with the audience; the presentation and discussion generated a number of ideas that we'll consider implementing and sharing at a future conference. For example, one of the areas we are focusing on for the coming year is promoting and publicising the service of the mentors, which in turn will increase student and staff knowledge of the Learning Development services we offer. We have started to do this by being more 'visible' at open days and welcome events where we can showcase merchandise (e.g., planners and post-its) designed by the Learning Development Mentors to market the service.

Acknowledgements

References

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Author details

Sheryl Mansfield is Head of Learning Development at University of Northampton (UON) and she has worked in the field for over five years. She has a teaching background and uses her diverse knowledge of pedagogy to facilitate practical and engaging sessions to help demystify academic skills. Externally, Sheryl is Chair of the Professional Recognition Working Group and a member of the ALDinHE Steering Group.

Sam Thomas has worked as a Learning Development Tutor at the University of Northampton for the last five years. Prior to this she worked in academic and public libraries in a range of professional roles, including reader development, teaching digital literacy, and answering enquiries. Her current research interests include the role of language in teaching and learning, accessibility and inclusion in Learning Development, and working collaboratively with students and colleagues to develop effective study skills support.