Engaging first year students at a metropolitan university: is electronic mentoring an effective strategy?

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Abstract

Many H.E. departments have developed schemes for promoting student engagement through providing first year students with a second or third year student as ‘mentor’. These schemes range from informal introductions at induction events, through ‘buddy’ schemes, to more formal study support schemes where students are trained to provide academic input to less experienced peers. Students at a metropolitan university, mostly living some distance away and often living at home with parents have been found to have particular needs which may be partly met through peer support. Social and academic integration are a major challenge. The advantages of, and challenges for, mentoring schemes are discussed. One possible way of providing mentoring for a large, disparate student body is through e-mentoring. An on-line peer ‘e-mentoring’ scheme for providing additional support and guidance to students is described and evaluated. Year 3 Psychology undergraduates in the UK were trained to undertake mentoring, via e-mail, of students in Year 1. Evaluation of the impact of the scheme on the student learning experience includes comparisons on a number of measures with a previous cohort of students who did not have access to e-mentoring. Findings have shown that students in cohorts which were offered mentoring felt more socially integrated into the university and reported higher satisfaction with the university across the year than the cohort which was not offered e-mentoring. Those students who actively made use of the scheme reported significantly greater self-efficacy and higher satisfaction with the university than those who did not make use of the scheme. Responses to feedback questionnaires have demonstrated that mentors, as well as mentees, are positive about what they have gained from participation in e-mentoring.

Introduction

Mentoring is not a new concept ‘Those who seek mentoring will rule the great expanse under heaven….’ Se Cheng, Chinese Book of History, 6th Century BC. It can be defined as a deliberate pairing of a less experienced person with a more skilled or experienced person who provides advice, support, and encouragement (Murray, 1991).

The first year of a degree course can be an intimidating, stressful and bewildering time. This is particularly so in a widening participation context where students may have few family contacts who have been through the experience of completing a degree. Engaging students at this stage is a challenge and statistics show that many students do not stay on in HE. More advanced students have survived the first year experience and remember how they got through it, what information they found useful (or useless) and their own mistakes. This makes them a potential source of specific university, general academic and local student-orientated information that may be invaluable to first years.
Mentoring schemes have been seen by many course and subject area leaders as one way of providing personal contact across years of study and of allowing more experienced students to provide support and advice for new students. These schemes can take a number of forms. They sometimes involve only informal introductions at induction events. There are many ‘buddy’ schemes where a first year student is paired with a more advanced student and may be expected to meet up on one or more occasions to foster social and cross-year interaction. There are also formal study support schemes where students are trained and supported by tutors to provide academic support and even teaching in small group settings to less experienced peers.

While many such schemes have been undertaken and some have been described in the literature, there have been few systematic studies of their impact on the engagement of students who take part in the scheme in comparison with other students who have not.

In the setting of a metropolitan university where most of the students commute and many of them live at home with their parents, there are particular challenges faced by students. In the U.K. the impact of these particular challenges on student engagement and retention is just beginning to be explored. The authors have been involved in a within-institution on-line survey of the first year student experience at such a University (Golding, Dewart, Hixenbaugh, Williams, Urwin, Murphy & Towell, 2006). The study investigated the relationship between a number of demographic variables and social and academic integration. Measures of financial circumstances and psychological health and well-being and general physical health were also included. Respondents were asked whether during their first few months as students they had seriously considered dropping out of University. Strong predictors of considering dropping out were concerns over student debt and concerns about how they were integrating academically and socially. As argued by Tinto (1997), the greater a student’s involvement and integration into the life of the university, the less likely they will be to leave.

As at many other universities, a personal tutoring system was in place. However, student numbers and other pressures on staff mean that the system can become more reactive than proactive and a review of the system demonstrated that many students felt that the onus was on them to maintain contact with the tutor.

Could a mentoring scheme be used to supplement the personal tutoring system? Research has shown that mentees are often highly committed to their organisations, less likely to leave and are more likely to go on to provide leadership talent within that organisation (Burke, McKenna and McKeen, 1991; Kram, 1985). Mentoring has also been shown to increase self-esteem (Fagenson, 1989) and reduce role stress and role conflict (Wilson & Elmann, 1990). Mentors also can gain from the experience. Evidence suggests that mentors receive many more benefits than costs from mentoring (Allen, Poteet and Burroughs, 1997). These include ratings of self-satisfaction and access to support networks.

Can peer mentoring within an academic environment stimulate similar positive attributes? One consistent finding in the literature has been that any type of mentoring activity in the past is linked to a positive willingness to mentor others (e.g. Allen, Poteet, Russell and Dobbins 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1993). This indicates that student mentees may be willing to take the part of a mentor when they complete their first year, thereby increasing the potential for a self-perpetuating scheme.
A support scheme that would supplement the personal tutoring system would have to provide personalized support, cope with large student numbers, yet be cost-effective and not put a heavy burden on resources. It should begin in the first few weeks since the first term/first semester is critical to student retention. The greater the investment in this period the less likely a student is to leave, as they feel more supported” (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001).

It was thought that it might be easier to raise worries with another student rather than with a member of staff and types of mentoring scheme were considered. Face-to-face schemes may work well for some individuals but previous experience was that meetings seldom extended beyond the first prearranged event. With a student group that is diverse culturally and in terms of age, pairings could often bring together very disparate individuals. Some first year students can feel at a disadvantage in cross-year contacts and might not wish to burden a mentoring partner with all their concerns in a face-to-face context.

A mentoring scheme that was, at the time, new to Higher Education was developed. This was the e-mentoring project which offered mentoring (via e-mail) to first year students by their peers in third year. What were the reasons for using e-mail communication?

The use of electronic communication for mentoring has inherent characteristics that make it particularly suited to mentoring. With e-mail communication there is virtual 24-hour access and there is flexibility for both mentor and mentee in when contact is made and maintained. There is no need to arrange a time and place to fit the varying demands of two sets of timetables. More frequent interaction between mentor and mentee is possible too. E-mail offers the facility to be stored, referred to, quoted or reviewed at any time with ease. In addition, e-mail may be less intimidating than face-to-face contact, particularly for the more shy or reticent. With a very diverse student group people from different age groups or different cultures may jump to the conclusion that they have little in common when they meet in person but in electronic communication such differences do not matter and participants may not even be aware of them. By e-mail communicators can carefully select the words and phrases they wish to use and the style in which they express themselves (McCormick & Leonard, 1996). In face-to-face contact they may worry that they will express themselves awkwardly or appear vulnerable in asking for help. The right moment to seek advice may pass and an encounter ends without the key issues being addressed. E-mail communication, on the other hand, is known to facilitate self-disclosure (Joinson, 2004). In addition, electronic communication is, of course, highly relevant to the lives of young people today and is increasingly so for more mature students too.

Mentoring has been shown to be valuable in various academic settings and for a variety of reasons including; peer mentoring for students in a South African University (Kagee et al., 1997), to help prevent school drop out (Einolf, 1995) and to encourage academic growth (Blum & Jones, 1993). However, its significance as a peer-mentoring tool to alleviate stresses associated with the university experience has not been explored. The combination of peer mentoring with e-mail is an attempt to combine the best aspects of mentoring with the unique attributes of e-mail.

The objectives of our e-mentoring scheme were to offer first year students an effective support system from people who understand their perspective, to provide third year students with training...
and experience of mentoring so as to enable them to use their University experience for the benefit of others and to assess the efficacy of the e-mentoring scheme.

**Methodology**

Mentors were recruited through asking for volunteers during the first week of the new academic year. Mentors had to attend mentor training which consists of discussion of what mentoring is and what its limits are. In the training mentees were asked to reflect on their own experience as first year students. Communication skills including attending, understanding and basic empathy were discussed. Mentors were made aware of possible danger signals and ethical issues that may arise. All first year students in the Department of Psychology (approximately 100 per annum) were allocated a mentor and each mentor had 4 to 6 first year mentees. Mentors and mentees were both asked to sign an e-mentoring agreement. As the scheme proceeded a ‘master mentor’ kept in touch with mentors and provided support where necessary. The master mentor was also responsible for the training sessions. The University’s Counselling and Advice Service were kept closely informed about the operation of the scheme.

The e-mentoring scheme was set up in such a way that evaluation was built into its design. It is now in its fourth year. Data have been analysed on how it has worked over the first three years. Evaluation took a number of forms. At the end of the academic year first year student mentees were asked to give their feedback regarding the scheme: how much they had used it, whether they had found it useful, how it could be improved. Mentors were also asked by questionnaire for their evaluation of the scheme. In addition, in order to gauge the psychological impact of the scheme, a series of questionnaires was administered to mentees at induction and at the end of the first semester and at the end of the academic year. The questionnaires measured levels of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), self-efficacy (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992), academic confidence, social integration, academic ambition and satisfaction with the university. Evaluation of the scheme has also benefited from having data on the same measures from a comparison group from the cohort of students who were first years in the academic year before e-mentoring was introduced.

**Results**

The number of students reporting that they had used the scheme has grown over the years. In the second year of operation 49% and in the third year 51% of students reported that they had made use of the scheme. Those who had not used it were asked why and 60% said they did not need to. Another 13% said they found help elsewhere. However, importantly, students who did not use it still said that they thought the scheme should be available for students in future years.

The number of students volunteering to become mentors has also increased as the scheme has progressed with current mentors being students who had access to the scheme in their own first year.

An important finding is that in each of the years of operation a small number of mentees reported that they had contacted their mentor specifically because they had been thinking of leaving their course and the University. In the third year of the scheme, 3 mentees (out of 110, 6%) reported this. These students all went on to complete the academic year. Each student who drops out experiences a personal disappointment but also incurs costs to the University in loss of fees. A
scheme that can help retain students in the University can be cost effective as well as supportive of students.

Direct feedback from mentees about the scheme has been consistently positive. Of the first year students offered mentoring, 95% thought that the e-mentoring scheme was a good idea, whether they used it or not. Of those who used the scheme, 70% found it useful and 81% found their mentor helpful. 75% of first year students said they were prepared to act as a mentor in their own final year of study.

Our statistical analysis of the questionnaire responses found a number of significant differences between students who had the opportunity to take up mentoring and those in the control cohort who did not. Students who were offered mentoring felt more socially integrated into the university (F(2,64) = 7.495; p < 0.001) and reported higher satisfaction with the university across the year than the non-mentored cohort (F(1,58) = 5.324, p<.025). Students who used the scheme reported significantly greater self-efficacy and higher satisfaction with the university across the year than those who did not use the scheme. Those who contacted their mentor had greater academic ambition than those who did not contact their mentor. Other findings, although not consistent over the three years, were all in a positive direction for mentored groups, e.g. an increase in self-esteem and academic confidence.

Feedback from mentors has also been positive. All who have responded to the mentor questionnaire thought that they had gained from being a mentor and that it benefited their mentees. They reported that they had been able to answer mentees’ questions and felt effective in their role. They said that it had not interfered with their own studies. Mentor volunteering has increased from 19 in 2002/3, to 46 in the current year.

Mentees were asked an open ended question about how they had used the scheme. Responses included:
“**I asked for advice with workload and a view of what the course is like in the final year and second year**”
“**Was concerned about doing assignments – mentor said not to worry as 1st year is about learning and improving those skills**”
“I had problems with research methods + needed reassuring”
“**What course modules to choose**”
“**Difficulties with time management, getting it all done!**”

Mentees were also asked to report on how they had used the scheme for support. Replies included:
“For advice on how to survive through a difficult time”
“I felt overwhelmed at the beginning and wanted to quit!”
“I needed the extra support”
“Desperation – lack of confidence”
“Stressed out”
“Panic, get encouragement, put things into perspective”
“Because he was there!”
Open-ended questions in the mentor questionnaire allowed mentors to say what is anything they had gained from the e-mentoring experience. Responses included:

“I enjoyed getting to know new people and allaying worries I probably had as a first year”

“I was happy to be able to help first years and felt I could relate well to the types of questions they were asking. I felt it was a positive experience for myself and the mentees I had contact with”

“Being a mentor has enabled me to reflect on my time at University and to offer information and support to those who were new to university life”

“I had a mentor in my first year at university, and I found them very helpful. I wanted to help others in the same situation. I wanted to give something back to the students and the university. I have great comfort knowing that I have helped others”

In conclusion, our experience is that e-mentoring has characteristics which make it very suitable for providing peer support in an academic setting, particularly where students are widely dispersed and also where there is a very diverse student group. Evaluation of the scheme has demonstrated that its presence is viewed positively by students whether or not they actually made use of it. Not only mentees but also mentors report benefits. On a number of measures of student experience students who had access to e-mentoring scored more highly than students who did not have access to the scheme. Qualitative comments also demonstrated positive impact for the scheme. E-mentoring can provide additional support at a critical time for student retention and can help with engaging students, both academically and socially.

References:


