An apple a day: Supporting 1st year learning and teaching through academic mentoring & peer-tutoring

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Background

• What are we trying to achieve?
  – Leadership development & student engagement;
  – Unique learning & teaching strategies;
  – Study skills & tools for success
  – Collaborative partnership
  – Improved student experience
Pick the apple - Meeting 1

1) Identify the need
   - What concerns or value add are you trying to address through mentoring?

2) Understand the client
   - What is the profile and what are the particular needs of the client?

3) Provide options
   - Which mentor model will best meet program and client needs?
Step 1 - Identify the need

- Identify the unique needs of program
- Outline the objectives
- Consider the issues you are trying to address:
  - attrition / retention;
  - failure rates;
  - social and academic transition to university;
  - building community within their course.
Step 1 - *Identify the need*

- **Example**
  - Psychology Peer-Assisted Tutorial Support (PPATS)
    - **Need:** To assist students gain fundamental study skills in psychology (i.e. lab report)
    - **Objective:** To ensure students had sufficient understanding & skills to complete lab report on time
    - **Issues:**
      - High student failure rates
      - Ongoing academic skills concerns
      - Attrition rates in 1st year psychology
Step 2 - Understand the client

- Understand the structure & context
  - lectures, tutorials, laboratories
- Identify real and perceived limitations
  - timetable barriers
  - academic workload
  - strong industry regulation around course content
- Select the program team required to succeed
  - who should be invested in this program?
Step 2 - Understand the client

• Example
  – Psychology Peer Assisted Tutorial Support (PPATS)
    • Structure & Context:
      – Tutorials facilitated by postgraduate tutors
      – Currently no interaction btw 1st years and other psych students
    • Limitations:
      – Numbers of students in 1st year
      – Academic workload
      – Funding to resource program
    • Project team:
      – 1st year Coordinator
      – Senior Lecturer - Psychology
      – Postgraduate tutors, research students
      – LEAD, SET, Study & Learning Centre
Step 3 - *Provide options*

- Consider program models
  - focus on factors for success and sustainability
    - one-to-one mentoring
    - small group peer-tutoring
    - drop-in centre peer-tutors
- Draw out concerns & address key barriers
  - Use prior experience and best practice models
- Agree on action and schedule next meeting
  - ‘Homework’ is set prior to the next meeting
    - Absorb information
    - Work through resources
    - Rally support from relevant team members
    - Come up with questions
Step 3 - *Provide options*

- **Example**
  - Psychology Peer Assisted Tutorial Support (PPATS)
    - **Talk Program Model**
      - Small group mentoring / large no. ‘mentees’ & limited mentors
      - Embedded into tutorials / building into the curriculum
      - Structured activities & discussion points / maximum engagement
    - **Address Concerns**
      - Student numbers / Pilot program rolled out across one tutorial group
      - Academic workload / hire postgrad tutor to champion
      - Funding / seek grant opportunities (LTIF)
    - **Homework**
      - Speak with colleagues
      - Approach mentors
      - Go thru LEAD resources
      - Review psychology course structure
      - Set time for meeting with mentors
      - Questions
Polish the apple - Meeting 2

1) Structure the program

2) Clarify roles and responsibilities

3) Benefits for all
Step 4 - *Structure the program*

- Review, consider and address issues and feedback from meeting 1
  - Emphasising a collaborative and problem solving approach, address what is achievable and accommodate limitations.
  - Always be adjusting program design while seeking final basic plan for implementation

- Be always seeking solutions to be tested in pilot
  - Emphasise that the first run is a pilot and as such it is expected that there will be teething problems that are addressed in the 2nd run.

- Keep it simple, emphasise an action research approach
  - Idea or question > research, analysis & reflection > conclusions & planning > recommendations for action > Action >>
  - Many projects never get started due to attempting to plan for every contingency. As a pilot your program should be the 'basic model' with fine tuning made in the reflection and planning for the 2nd and subsequent iteration.
  - Naming the program as action research assists to validate the program as an accepted academic endeavour with ongoing trial, error, reflection and improvement.
Step 5 - Clarify roles and responsibilities

• Determine and clarify roles and responsibilities
  – It is important for all stakeholders expectations accurately reflect reality, especially in regards to role, workload and responsibilities.

• Local level ownership equals commitment and sustainability
  – By this stage local level understanding of objectives, design, implementation plan and roles should be clear so that fine tuning is informed by local knowledge.
  – Buy-in equals commitment and with ongoing support the local level stakeholders now start to own the program and have an investment in its ongoing success.

• Allocation of work, commence recruitment of mentors, space acquisition, etc.
  – Implementation commences with design of the mentor recruitment strategy (see LEAD volunteer recruitment) that also acts to concretize the program boundaries such as start/finish dates, key objectives, training, etc.
Step 6 - Benefits for all

• Reiterate and reinforce benefits and expected outcomes by linking to examples, policy and research.
  – “…interactive and participatory learning.. greater student ownership of the learning process.. immediate feedback.. enhances cogitative processing in the peer tutor/ mentor..” (Topping, 1998)
  – “…positive impacts on student /teacher ratios, motivation and attitudes, social interactions and engagements..” (Chester, 2007)
  – “…projects that bring together students to facilitate development of social and learning communities and foster a shared consensus regarding institutional goals promote persistence..” (Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, & Lynch, 2003)

• Finalisation of program design and allocation of actions, and plan next meeting
  – fine tuning of mentor/ mentee interaction e.g. ice breaker, social transition, etc
  – amendments to course guide, i.e. embedding the program
  – mentor recruitment plan e.g. brochure and initial engagement activities
  – communication planning, e.g. use of Blackboard, F2F meetings, etc.
  – commence design of training that supports required skill sets
Perfect the apple - Meeting 3

1) Identify the skill set
   – What do the mentors need to be able to do?

2) Establish learning objectives
   – What specific outcomes will guide training?

3) Devise and deliver training
   – How will we deliver the outcomes?
Step 7- *Identify the skill set*

- What will the mentors be doing?
- What skills do they already have?
- What skills do they need to develop?

*Example:* First year Psychology (2nd year mentors)

**What they’ll be doing:**
- assisting in transition of 1st year students to program & RMIT
- facilitating small groups
- acting as a resource base
- guiding and supporting report writing
- contextualising the course

**Already studied as part of program:**
- communication theory
- learning styles

**What skills they need to develop:**
- understand the role of a mentor
- group facilitation skills
- awareness of resources
- strategies for assisting report-writing
- intercultural awareness
Step 8 - Establish learning objectives

• Training is usually 5 hours
  – 4 delivered by Study and Learning Centre
  – 1 delivered by the program or course Champion

• Concrete achievable outcomes for the training, stated in objectives

• For example: 2nd year Psychology mentors
  – Define the concept of mentoring
  – Articulate roles and boundaries
  – Use active listening skills
  – Identify strategies for assisting report writing
  – Identify own and RMIT resources
Step 9 - Design and deliver training

Training resources are selected from a growing range of mini-modules which can be interlocked together. These include:

- What is a mentor? Identifying roles and boundaries.
- Working with a team
- Building rapport
- Active listening skills
- Cultural diversity and academic expectations
- Learning styles
- Reflective practice
- Knowing RMIT

Some specific activities may need to be devised for the individual cohort. In some programs the mentoring is also tied to an assessment task.
Sample training activity

- **Learning objective:** Articulate roles and boundaries of a mentor

- **The envelope activity**
  - Students discuss a set of questions or statements they draw from an envelope and identify what are appropriate attitudes or expectations from each perspective

*For example:*
- **Mentee:** Can you correct the English in my report?
- **Mentor:** This student is hopeless at statistics

• Students then brainstorm a set of “rules” for mentors around the headings:
  - **Always:**
  - **Avoid:**
  - **Be clear about:**
Thank you!

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