‘I just can’t remember what they were about, at all’: an evaluation of first year undergraduate discipline-specific mentoring and peer mentoring programs.

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation and evaluation of the discipline-specific mentoring and peer mentoring programs at La Trobe University’s Rural Health School in northern Victoria. A survey was utilised as well as focus groups to engage students in the evaluation of their experiences of these programs in 2010 and 2011. Many students were able to clearly articulate that discipline-specific mentoring was not effective in inducting them into first year academic and discipline frameworks, or that the program was effective in preparing them for their future professional education. The discipline-specific mentoring program was not effective in providing students with a clear professional identity that they could consider while studying in the first year of their respective courses. The implications of this study are that academic mentoring and peer mentoring programs require very careful consideration in the planning and implementation phases in order for them to be effective from a student’s perspective.

Introduction

This study evaluated first year undergraduate discipline-specific mentoring and peer mentoring programs across La Trobe University’s Rural Health School in northern Victoria. The La Trobe Rural Health School (LRHS) was established in 2009 across four regional areas of northern Victoria, i.e. Mildura, Bendigo, Shepparton and Wodonga. The LRHS offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in nursing, social work, dentistry and oral health, para-medicine, occupational therapy, health promotion, environmental health, physiotherapy, speech pathology and podiatry with the main aim to increase the workforce of health professionals in rural and regional communities.

Discipline-specific mentoring was introduced as an integral part of the first year experience of La Trobe University’s Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) new suite of 4-year undergraduate Masters courses and the current Bachelor of Health Sciences course. Peer mentoring was introduced by the social work and nursing disciplines at the Bendigo campus in 2009 and had been implemented by dentistry/oral health, health sciences/public health, speech pathology and physiotherapy with varying success since 2010.

Background and aim of the study

Initial evaluations of student and staff experiences of the Foundation First Year (FFY) (La Trobe University, 2009) showed dissatisfaction with the new program. Team assessment tasks, the on-line learning management system, the peer rating system and lack of discipline specific activities were the main criticisms expressed by students. Overall, 40% of the students were satisfied with their learning in 2009 and 38% of students were not satisfied. Academic staff indicated that links to orientation, student study skills, peer rating, online
learning systems, time and administrative support were the main issues impacting on their role.

During 2010, academic staff at the Bendigo campus were interested in a more comprehensive evaluation of discipline mentoring and peer mentoring as they linked to the aims of the FFY as it existed in 2011 at the four regional campuses. The primary aim of this evaluation was to accurately record and measure both student and staff perspectives of discipline-specific and peer mentoring programs across all regional campuses of LRHS. Secondary aims were to study and document internal curriculum reports pertinent to discipline mentoring as well as to conduct an online search for similar program designs in higher education nationally to understand the rationale of the current program and to provide advice on its improvement.

**Mentoring in an academic environment**

Tinto (2012) summarises the attributes of effective tertiary education learning as; expectations, support, assessment, feedback and involvement. He critiques student retention and engagement programs as mostly, ‘not well conceived, are voluntary in nature and/or attract a small segment of teaching staff’ (Tinto, 2012, 7). Student expectations of the first year of undergraduate study are seen as crucial to retention and success (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyi, Burke da Silva & Brinkworth, 2011). In their study of student expectations of the first year of study at universities in Adelaide, South Australia, Scutter et al (2011) reveal that attendance, developing relationships, their own abilities and the importance of friendships all contributed to the success and retention of students.

Orientation programs play a crucial role in alleviating the fears and stress that often interrupt the first semester of undergraduate life (Gill, Ramjan, Koch, Dlugon, Andrew & Salamonson, 2011). A study in Sydney, New South Wales, found that ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-for-me’ orientation programs were more successful than general orientation programs because they were more student-centred (Gill et al, 2011). The study also found that the two key factors to the success of student orientation and engagement programs are ‘(a) the high level leadership provided by the College, including consistency in messages and (b) assurance of effective and productive partnerships between schools, student services and other administrative units of the University’ (Gill et al., 2011, 68).

Academic mentoring has been shown to improve the self-esteem, self-efficacy and overall satisfaction of students within a wide range of academic programs in diverse contexts (Ferrari, 2004). Academic mentoring appears to be most successful when mentor and mentee are well matched in the areas of work and life balance, research outcomes and aspirations for career advancement (Ewing, Freeman, Barrie, Bell, O’Connor, Waugh & Sykes, 2008). Traditionally the functions of academic mentoring include being a role model and teacher, and someone who challenges the mentee by acting as a sounding board and providing relevant personal and professional guidance (Ferrari, 2004).

Peer mentoring creates more collegial or collaborative relationships (Le Cornu, 2005) and as such there should be no barriers to successful peer-based mentoring caused by disparities in factors such as age, experience and life background (Driscoll, Parkes, Tiley-Lubbs, Brill & Pitts Bannister, 2009). Peer mentoring can be undertaken in various formats; generally involving students at different stages of study within the same or across other courses. Semi-formal tutorial settings for peer mentoring can be structured where it is not the responsibility of the mentor to undertake academic tutoring. Peer mentors on the other hand do not tutor, they are encouraged to offer support and share their past experiences of specific undergraduate courses and being a student (Fox & Stevenson, 2006).
Methodology

This study utilised a mixed methods design incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This form of methodology allows for a more in depth conceptualisation and analysis and provision of generalised results for utilisation in future evaluations of such programs (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010). Furthermore mixed method designs are commonly seen within formative and impact evaluations as they increase the diversity of data and the validity of conclusions (Wholey, Hatry & Newcomer, 2010).

The student cohort that participated included students completing their first year of undergraduate studies in 2011. The project evaluation timeframe was from January to December 2011. Engaging with senior academics and discipline specific mentors as key stakeholders was imperative during later stages of the evaluation process to aid amendment of the program during 2012. Due to the involvement of academics as facilitators and as researchers, and because of the power-based relationships between academic and students, a research assistant was employed, who remained separate from academic programs and who was able to liaise with academic staff and students. Ethical approval was obtained from the FHS’ Human Ethics Committee.

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants were representative of the specific groups of students and staff of the regional campuses of the LRHS. A quantitative survey was developed via Survey Monkey and utilised to evaluate the effectiveness of both programs and a link to the survey was delivered via mass email to all first year LRHS students during August 2011. A second mass email was sent to all 1st year students in October 2011. In total 89 LRHS students responded to the survey over the time period from August to the end of October 2011.

Focus groups were utilised to collect qualitative data and student representatives were sourced across first and second year levels within the LRHS. Eight focus groups were conducted with a total of 93 students who were enrolled at the time of the study in the fields of nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, social work, health sciences and health promotion and environmental health, speech pathology and para-medicine. Students were invited from all regional campuses to participate; however, responses for focus group participation were received only from the Bendigo campus. The 10 focus group questions were divided into two distinct categories with five questions in each, discipline mentoring and peer mentoring within LRHS. Questions centred on the purposes and benefits of each program and whether these programs had any impact on students’ skills, communication and connection to the university environment. Transcript data were entered in NVivo and coded by two independent research assistants. In-text quotes were referenced in italics and identified by focus group number and an alphabetical code was allocated to each individual student.

Results

A total of $n = 182$ LRHS students completed the survey or participated in focus groups, representing 33.33% of the total of LRHS students across the four regional campuses. Tables 1a and 1b show the demographic characteristics of the 90 students who completed the survey.
Four main themes emerged from the survey and focus groups data about both the discipline specific mentoring and the peer mentoring programs; lack of understanding/knowledge, learning/perceived learning, identity/insight/connection, and program effectiveness. Table 2 summarises the data connected to the themes, using descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Discipline Specific Mentoring data</th>
<th>Peer Mentoring data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding/ Lack of knowledge</td>
<td>What is the purpose of discipline mentoring: 78.4% connection with students 48% provide academic support 41% provide social support 40% provide transition support 5.7% not sure</td>
<td>What is the purpose of peer mentoring? 66.7% transition support 61.9% academic support 57.1% social support 47.6% connect students in same discipline 4.8% not sure.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What skills did you develop? 43.2% communication skills 30.7% academic skills 30.7% improved social skills 19.3% organising skills 8% time management skills</td>
<td>How beneficial was peer mentoring in connecting to other students in the same discipline? 52.4% beneficial/ very beneficial 28.6% neutral 19.1% not so beneficial/ not at all beneficial.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How effective was discipline mentoring in keeping you informed about the discipline you chose to study 23.9% highly effective 50% effective 18.2% neutral 8% ineffective or highly ineffective.</td>
<td>How effective it was to connect to a mentor? 38.1% very easy 38.1% happened but not very often 9.5% happened rarely 9.5% very difficult 4.7% not at all</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How effective was discipline mentoring in keeping you motivated to stay at university? 17% highly effective 33% effective 30.7% neutral 19.3% ineffective or highly ineffective</td>
<td>How effective was peer mentoring in developing communication skills? 47.7% effective/ highly effective 38.1% neutral 14.3% ineffective/ highly ineffective.</td>
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Table 2: Thematic analysis

The qualitative data reinforced the themes in a much stronger way:
Understanding and knowledge

In contrast to the results of the focus groups the survey results data showed that students expressed a distinct lack of understanding and knowledge about the underlying purposes of the discipline-specific mentoring program. For some students, discipline-specific mentoring was about exploring their specific discipline and their future career paths: *I think the purpose of it was trying to bring all the nursing students together, so you kind of get familiar faces and to just let us know what it’s going to be like in the real world, more than just what we are doing in our text books and things* (FG5:Ff). The majority opinion from the focus groups can be reflected this one comment; *I don’t know what discipline mentoring is? I really think I went to all of them, maybe…but I just can’t remember what they were about, at all* (FG1:C).

For these students, not understanding the purposes and relevance of discipline-specific mentoring within the first year was then expressed in their dissatisfaction with their chosen career paths and this may then be representative of the transfer rates seen between courses at the completion of first year: *I really didn’t enjoy this first year at all but I just want to get into learning stuff about my course. It’s not pointless, but you’re going to learn things that you’ll never have to use, because we’re all going to have to specialise in different areas* (FG5:Ff). It was noted that there was inconsistent communication between academics and students surrounding the discipline-specific mentoring program and this appears to be a contributing factor to the poor attendance rates seen. One person commented that *I think the facilitators had it very poorly advertised* (FG1:A).

Not all of the students had negative experiences of discipline-specific mentoring with five students making comment that the discipline mentoring sessions provided an avenue to expand their knowledge base and gain more insight into their future career paths: *Yeah, it was good, being in first year, we haven’t had a placement or anything, so we don’t know really what it is all about yet, so having other people’s insight was good at the start of the year* (FG8:Eee). Eight students expressed that discipline-specific mentoring provided a way for them to connect to their discipline academics and other students in their chosen course. *It helped us a lot, because everyone is spread out across all the classes and we’re only a small group, there’s only 15 of us paramedics, so it really helped us get to know each other more than anything else, so that was probably the main advantage of it* (FG5:Bb).

Learning

Learning and the perceived level of learning for students were important factors that underpinned their university experience and this in turn influenced their perceptions surrounding the content they felt they would receive through the discipline-specific mentoring sessions and in part acted as a motivator for their attendance in these sessions. *I went a few times and it just didn’t seem worth it, so I thought I would rather spend my time doing my assignments and stuff like that* (FG3:N).

Most students remained focused on skill acquisition alone and this informed perceptions surrounding their level of learning and reinforced general misunderstandings concerning how knowledge gained in the university environment can inform, influence and have an impact on the social and health care context within Australia: *others have come in from their first year at TAFE, they know pretty much most of what we are learning and they are getting more placement. We are doing more bookwork* (FG2:J).
Similarly individual learning styles were expressed throughout with regard to how students could have benefited more specifically from discipline-specific mentoring. The importance of how people learn and gain information is expressed in the following excerpts: I’ve been at uni for a year and a half and I hadn’t even stepped foot in a hospital yet. I think I would have benefited so much just to see it, know what it is like, it would have taken away the I don’t know what this is, for me. (FG2:I).

**Professional Identity**

In terms of how professional identity impacted on attendance one student stated that: *I think first year for a lot of the bigger disciplines, they’re identifiable because they wear shirts, the nursing and the dental students all have to wear shirts on prac days, whereas you know we just have casual, so that was a big thing we all wanted, in our own time we organised to have hoodies so it was just something we could just identify ourselves as* (FG4:Y). Comments from the survey about what skills discipline-specific mentoring developed for current 1st year students revealed that 12 out of 20 comments said *none* with only a few comments linking to identity and insight such as; *further knowledge about my chosen career, better understanding of my discipline, small amount of discipline skills* and finally, *I don’t believe discipline mentoring provided the opportunity to improve any interpersonal skills, it gave students the opportunity to find out about their discipline, hence providing motivation to get through the common first year.*

**Program Effectiveness**

With regard to program effectiveness, the survey data differs from the student voices from the focus groups that were mostly negative about discipline-specific mentoring. It must be acknowledged that focus group facilitators had expressed that many students responded quite neutrally or in their words ‘blankly’ to the questions asked during focus group sessions. The survey reveals with regard to program effectiveness, 50% of responses were positive and 50% were neutral or negative about the discipline mentoring experience. Given the importance of discipline specific mentoring to a foundation year of professional practice undergraduate courses, the data revealed that students at LRHS were not convinced of its effectiveness. The FHS and LRHS would have wanted that in the third year of the implementation of this program, that a clear majority of students would be able to clearly articulate the purposes and effectiveness of such a crucial aspect of the foundation year of four year undergraduate Masters courses.

**Student views on peer mentoring**

The survey revealed that only 26.1% (n=23) of the respondents participated in peer mentoring programs in 2011. The survey data also revealed that over 60% of students did not connect to their mentor very often at all. Most significant for this evaluation of peer mentoring was when students were asked how they would design a peer mentoring program for 1st year students, 76.2% of respondents stated *very structured with regular sessions and structured group based peer mentoring* as their preferred option, no students indicated a preference for on-line peer mentoring and 23.8% preferred *informal and student centred* peer mentoring.

As with discipline-specific mentoring, students lacked knowledge and understanding about the peer mentoring program itself. *I think I went to the start of it or something, but nothing happened or eventuated out of that, I can’t remember* (FG1:E). Overwhelmingly students expressed that the peer mentoring program failed to provide peer connection, regardless of
whether they acted as a mentee or mentor. For most students the lack of structure surrounding the program hindered its successfulness and this was despite mentorship training days being held early in within first semester. One student stated: *There needs to be more contact, the mentor needs to contact us more or have some sort of get together right at the start* (FG3:P).

**Discussion**

In summarising the themes of this research; 1st year students across all disciplines and campuses of LRHS are not gaining the *understanding and knowledge* they need about the place of discipline mentoring in the 1st year of their courses. Despite the fact that academic mentoring has been identified as a useful tool to improve student engagement (Ferrari, 2004; Ewing et al, 2008), the discipline mentoring program evaluated here has failed most students in providing them with the *learning* they require about their courses, Australia’s health and human services, inter-professional practice or the specifics about how their discipline fits within these broader frameworks.

Although many first year students have some idea of a professional identity when they commence their studies, the importance of continuing to develop that identity is paramount for ongoing retention (Adams, Hean, Sturgis & Macleod Clarke, 2006, Grealish & Trevitt, 2005). Many students in the current study were able to clearly articulate the discipline mentoring was not effective for them in inducting them into these frameworks and preparing them for their future professional education or providing them with choice should they wish to transfer between courses or in fact in between universities, if their grade point average (GPA) is impacted on by team type assessments. The discipline-specific mentoring program was also not effective in providing students with a clear professional identity that they could consider while studying in the 1st year of their courses which has clear implications for future practice.

The same themes can be applied to the peer mentoring program that was facilitated in 2011. Peer mentoring has been shown to be successful in assisting students negotiate their first year at university (Le Cornu, 2005; Fox & Stevenson, 2006), however, students in the current study were not given the experience of peer mentoring to any extent that allowed them to explore the *understanding and knowledge* of what peer mentoring is and how it can be utilised as part of the 1st year undergraduate experience. The program did not provide access to the *learning* that had been acquired by students at higher year levels within each discipline to further the 1st year experience as an academic experience. The peer mentoring program was then not effective in grounding LRHS students in the academic, social and discipline experiences of 1st year undergraduate studies.

There is significant Australian literature that evaluates peer mentoring which provides frameworks for the development of peer mentoring in tertiary education (Townsend, Delves, Kidd & Figg, 2011; Adam, Skalicky & Brown, 2011). A community of practice model for peer mentoring is one that could be considered in that it promotes participation and is likely to be sustainable, cost effective and student centred, thereby promoting leadership (Adam et al, 2011). Prior research conducted at La Trobe University (Townsend et al, 2011) found that peer mentoring and other forms of mentoring had developed in an ad hoc manner and without intellectual rigour. There is some evidence that this will be addressed in future years.

It has been recommended that in 2012, discipline-specific mentoring programs be re-named to encompass what the program is actually aiming to achieve, for example, Nursing Professional Practice, Social Work Professional Practice and so on. Discipline-specific professional
practice programs need to be clearly integrated into relevant 1st year subjects that explore frameworks of professional practice including inter-professional practice and an exploration of health and human services policy frameworks in Australia.

The discipline-specific professional practice programs can then be linked with intra university inter-professional health care team challenges, as conducted at the University of Queensland (Boyce, Moran, Nissen, Chenery & Brooks, 2009), where students develop teamwork and leadership, and are challenged on what they have learnt. This is likely to add valuable learning experience for the students and meaning to the subject, and can lead to a representation at national competitions during the latter years of each discipline program. Boyce et al. (2009) articulate that university curriculum structures and processes impact negatively on the time students can spend with each other, across disciplines, exploring the diverse professions in health care and the nature of inter-professional practice. They outline a program at the University of Queensland known as the Health Care Team Challenge.

The challenge is for health sciences students to form teams of nine students who interview health professionals and patients and then develop a management plan. The teams are then given additional information in stages with issues that need to be addressed and incorporated in an extension plan for patient care through a process of problem-based learning. Each final patient management plan and team performance is judged and the winning team is announced. The University of Queensland is planning national and international Health Care Team Challenge events in the future (Boyce et al., 2009). Although the more senior students are the active participants in such a program, junior students can observe and build peer relationships within their discipline as well as across disciplines. This has the potential to, both, complement the discipline-specific mentoring program and the peer mentoring program.

**Strengths and limitations**

Although recruiting and sustaining student participation during semester time was difficult and representation of LRHS students was limited in focus group participation, survey take-up was representative across the four campuses and across disciplines. The Bendigo academic staff coordinating this research were well known to students which may have impacted on focus group participation between campuses as participants of the focus groups consisted only of the regional campus of Bendigo.

**Conclusion**

Given that many institutions are now implementing university wide peer mentoring programs to enhance the 1st year experiences of students. This study considered the need to embed structured peer mentoring program into semester 2 of 1st year programs where discipline specific 3rd and 4th year students facilitate sessions with 1st year students to explore the concepts and practicalities of professional and inter-professional practice. It was also considered that in order for the first year experience to be enhanced program evaluations need to be conducted each year.

There is a paucity of literature around the effectiveness of academic mentoring specifically in the Australian context. Most literature tends explore the academic mentoring of new academics by more established academics in an apprentice type model (Townsend et al, 2011) and not academic mentoring of undergraduate students by academics. This is a significant gap in the literature and research of the first year experience of undergraduate students and needs
An evaluation of first year undergraduate discipline-specific mentoring and peer mentoring programs, referred to be addressed as a priority if we, as a tertiary education sector, are going to provide effective programs to a growing number of students.

References


La Trobe University (2009). *Report on the Student and Staff Experience of the Common First Year Program Semester One 2009*, Dr Peter Howard, Faculty of Health Sciences, August 2009, unpublished.


