Skill development and social inclusion via peer assisted learning in first-year higher education: An evaluation of student experiences across two law units

TRACEY CARVER and NATALIE CUFFE
Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

Because professions seek graduates who can ‘collaborate, share skills and knowledge, and communicate’ (Kruck and Reif, 2001, p 37), it is important that university graduates are not equipped solely with the content knowledge of their discipline, but also with prospective employment skills. Furthermore, when students ‘interact more in positive ways with their teachers and peers, they gain more in terms of essential skills and competencies, such as critical thinking, problem-solving [and] effective communication’ (NSSE, 2000, p 2). In this way, peer assisted learning has the potential to enhance students’ professional development, and provide the social inclusion and engagement necessary for effective learning. This session describes two peer assisted learning models embedded within first year QUT Faculty of Law units. Through a partnership between teaching staff, student mentors and mentees, the models aim to facilitate student socialisation whilst supplementing understanding of substantive law with the development of academic and work-related skills. Mentor and mentee perceptions, and program implications, are considered.

Background

Universities are no longer expected to equip their graduates solely with the content knowledge of their discipline. Indeed, given that the ‘half-life of information is [now] measured in months and years’ (Frand, 2000, p 17), the development of work-related skills through collaborative learning, may today be more relevant to student transition from university to professional practice than mere knowledge accumulation. In the context of law, this is evidenced by the current emphasis placed by The CALD Standards for Australian Law Schools on the development of generic skills or graduate capabilities (in the areas of research, analysis, reasoning, problem-solving, and communication), as part of university degrees leading to practice as a legal practitioner (Council of Australian Law Deans, 2009, [2.3]). Additionally, students in their first year of tertiary study are not only transitioning to a new learning environment, but are also often struggling to come to terms with a large volume of new material, principles and techniques ‘beyond their current experience’ (Donelan and Kay, 1998, p 288). As such, as well as the development of work-related skills, the social and collaborative learning environments facilitated through peer assisted learning have the potential to facilitate student adjustment to the expectations of university study, by aiding students to develop effective learning and study skills (van der Meer and Scott, 2009). Notwithstanding this, the advantages of such programs are arguably not confined to the first-year student mentees (or peer assisted learning participants) themselves, but also extend to enhance the academic and work-related, or transferable, skills of the more experienced
mentors, or student peers who lead and facilitate program sessions. Such skills include, for example: leadership; oral and written communication; critical thinking and problem-solving; collaboration; organisation and time management; information technology skills; networking; and self-confidence (Amaral and Vala, 2009; Stout and McDaniel, 2006; Donelan and Kay, 1998; Heirdsfieeld, Walker, Walsh and Wills, 2008).

Peer-to-peer collaboration, by enhancing a student’s sense of engagement, belonging and connection may also increase student resilience, retention and academic outcomes both within and beyond the unit supported (Malm, Bryngfors and Mörner, 2011; van der Meer and Scott, 2008; ACER, 2009). As Kift et al. (2010, p 9) state:

students who find support for their learning, receive frequent feedback about their learning and are actively involved in their learning, especially with others, are more likely to learn and in turn more likely to be able to reflect on their university experience and achieve transition and closure.

Indeed, participation in peer assisted learning is likely to increase the engagement necessary for effective student learning, by both mentors and/or mentees, by satisfying the following six propositions outlined by Macken (2011, pp 323-30):

- Enabling student participation in active learning, by allowing students to construct their own knowledge by “doing” rather than by simply being “told”;
- Allowing (particularly on the part of mentors), individual staff-student interaction outside the boundaries of formal classrooms and curriculum;
- Enabling students to participate, and volunteer, in enriching “beyond-classroom” experiences;
- Providing access to a university learning community where students can feel supported in their study;
- Preparing students for future careers (whether as legal professionals, teachers or in other spheres of employment); and
- Enabling students to engage in higher-order forms of thinking; and the development of generic and social skills and understandings.

The Models of Peer Assisted Learning Implemented

In the Torts Student Peer Mentor Program at the Queensland University of Technology’s Faculty of Law, student volunteers (successful past Torts students or mentors), facilitate structured group discussions and activities with current students. In sessions, groups of up to 30 students are facilitated by two mentors. The mentors’ role is to use the collaborative techniques learnt and supported by training, and regular meetings with the program coordinator, to: keep the group focused on the session topic; enable the participation of all students; and provide them with the best chance of understanding and progressing through session content as a group. In terms of session planning, mentors are provided with a set of “peer mentor materials” which contain proposed topics, activities, questions and resources, for use in each week’s mentoring session. The Torts online Blackboard Site also provides mentees with a suggested timetable of weekly topics and proposed problem-solving questions. However, to ensure student-centred learning, mentees are also encouraged to set their own agenda – where the suggested materials in any given week are considered, or not, according to a groups’ own needs. Consequently, the mentor’s role is not teaching, re-teaching, or providing students with “the answer”. Rather, the Program provides a forum for
mentees, under the guidance of their mentors, to assist each other to find answers for themselves. Accordingly, in this way, first year students are encouraged to build both online and face-to-face communities of practice and assist each others’ learning by discussing substantive law, fostering critical thinking, and developing academic skills. These skills include: locating and reading cases; note-taking and summary writing; essay writing; legal issue identification; study skills and strategies; and examination and assessment technique.

In 2011, the Law School expanded the peer mentoring program beyond Torts Law into other first year units, most significantly Legal Foundations B. This is a unit that focuses on legal research and writing and uses the content area of legal ethics and the legal profession to situate the learning of legal research and writing. As the content of Legal Foundations B is skills and not substantive law a slightly different model was adopted in structuring this peer mentoring program, which was called PARL (Peer Assisted Research Learning). Research and writing skills are enhanced by practice and exposure to a variety of research and writing tasks so a previous assessment problem formed the basis of the suggested tasks for PARL mentoring. Mentors could comment on the answers to the previous assessment problem as that does not form part of the skills content of the unit thereby allowing modelling and reverse engineering of research and writing processes to aid learning without reteaching. The use of the virtual classroom software Elluminate by mentors to facilitate PARL sessions for external students was also trialled. Online technologies, such as Elluminate, have the potential to replicate the benefits of the social networks developed in face-to-face peer sessions in a virtual community (Huijser, Kimmins and Evans, 2008).

In 2010, a survey (Carver, 2011) of 130 of the 584 student mentees voluntarily enrolled in weekly face-to-face peer mentor sessions in Torts A, revealed that students perceived that program participation across five or more sessions had, or would, improve their results. They also perceived that it had positively assisted them to settle into university as a first year law student. However, although mentee responses illustrated the positive effect of participation on the development of academic and work-related skills, the development of competencies also transferable to the workplace was not as strongly perceived.

Whilst the failure of students to perceive the skills development benefits of peer assisted learning has previously been acknowledged (Fitzsimmons, Kozlina and Vines, 2006; van der Meer and Scott, 2009), the preliminary results of subsequent surveys of mentors in both the Torts and Foundations B programs, nevertheless suggest that the development of work-related skills is more strongly perceived by this student cohort. Additionally, although in their second and subsequent years of university study, mentors’ perceptions also suggest that program participation has positively assisted their own social inclusion.

**Suggested Issues for Discussion**

(1) What strategies might be used to increase student perception, by both mentors and mentees, of the generic skills benefits of peer assisted learning when developed in the context of a particular unit? Which of these strategies would you consider the most appropriate/helpful?

(2) In terms of assisting students to develop academic and work-related skills, are there any advantages of a unit specific program, in comparison to a university or faculty wide initiative?
Session Outline

20 minutes: A presentation of the peer assisted learning models embedded within the Torts Law and Foundations B units at QUT - how they are used to foster academic and work-related skills development, student perceptions of their effectiveness, the challenges faced, and the implications of these for similar programs in the sector.

10 minutes: Participant discussion of issues (1) and/or (2) (above) in small groups. As relevant, participants will then: share the ideas emerging from the above discussion with all participants; rate the most effective strategies offered; and share similar challenges faced in their own contexts.

References


