

Collaborative capacity building: Applying third generation principles in scaffolding first-year university student success

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Abstract

With widening participation in higher education in Australia being a focus of Federal Government initiatives and imperatives, universities are being challenged to develop ways to provide support to an increasing population of students from non-traditional university-entrant backgrounds. For students from these non-traditional university entrant backgrounds, the traditions, processes and expectations required for success in university learning can be problematic. Drawing on socio-cultural theories of learning, and Bourdieuan notions of cultural capital, this project mobilised principles of third generation first year pedagogy (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010) to provide support for students in developing the requisite knowledges and ways of being for student success. Combining the successful Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) student support program with course based peer mentoring (Miller, Oldfield, & Murtagh, 2006), the program used an emergent design guided by the students' curriculum experiences, and driven by a collaboration between academic and professional staff to provide point-of-need and just-in-time support to students in their transition to tertiary studies, and develop their capacities for continuing success. This session presents the design of this program, detailing the processes and tools that supported the project and presents preliminary findings from its first implementation in 2011.

Introduction

In response to institutional and federal government commitments to widening the participation rate in universities (Gillard, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008; Universities Australia, 2009), Australian universities are being challenged to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. First year experience initiatives are one response to supporting the transition, retention and success of these students, particularly those from non-traditional university-entrant backgrounds. This workshop explores an initiative that aims to support the transition of students into university study through a peer mentoring program structured around theories of the role of human needs (Maslow, 1943), Bourdieuan notions of cultural capital in educational success (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977), and supported by a partnership between academic and professional staff.

Background to the project

The first year experience has been identified as an important factor in successful transition and retention of first year students in university study (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2007). The transitional period, in which students develop their “tertiary student identity” (Kuh et al., 2007) requires institutional support (Reason et al., 2007) in developing the knowledges and understandings that will support students’ successful engagement within the university social and academic environment. Framed within a cultural capital perspective (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977), and notions of tertiary student equity and social justice (Gale 2009), this project aimed to apply third generation first year experience approaches, or transitions pedagogy (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010), in supporting the transition of students into university, in a peer mentoring project supported by a collaboration between academic and professional staff.

As a rural institution, the university where this research is based has a relatively high population of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students entering through technical college pathways, and students who are the first generation in their families to enter university studies (CSU, 2011). Of the initial enrolment of 77 students in the course in which this project is based, 20% were identified as being from low SES backgrounds, and 63% as first generation university students (CSU, 2011). The project combined the PASS program, developed for the University of Queensland by Miller, Oldfield and Murtagh (2006), with a course-based peer mentoring program to support the transition of these students, as well as others, in their transition into the university environment.

PASS programs have been shown to be effective in supporting student engagement and academic success (Martin and Hurley, 2005). In the PASS program, a student who has successfully studied in the target subject in the prior semester of offering is trained to lead and facilitate voluntary study sessions, based on peer learning, with the aim of supporting learning in historically difficult subjects. The PASS program is, therefore, content related, allowing students to build their knowledge of the subject-related curriculum. Although PASS aims to support student learning in a particular subject, it may also support student success in other subjects as the program also develops students’ knowledge of broader university processes that apply across their studies.

In this particular project, the curriculum of the first year subjects were aligned, applying “embedded design” principles (Bain, 2007) so that the development of skills and knowledges were scaffolded across all subjects, and in a progression across the course. This alignment of first year subjects presented an opportunity to also align the PASS and peer mentoring programs with the course experience. The students’ curriculum experience, understood in Tinto’s (2009) terms as comprising “all of the academic, social and support aspects” (p. 2) of the student experience, thus provided the vehicle to drive the provision of “just in time” and “just for me” support for individual students, and the cohort. This integration of support at a course level was intended to enable the benefits of these previously separate programs to be experiences at scale.

The peer mentoring process within these sessions applied a modified version of the cooperative learning think-pair-share strategy (Slavin, 1995) to provide support in an environment of increasing anonymity for students. This increasing anonymity is designed to provide students a safe context in which to ask what may appear to be “basic” questions, and to enable issues of shared concern to be addressed at the group or cohort level. These sessions also alerted the academic, professional and mentoring team to areas and issues of current

concern and relevance, enabling the provision of information at appropriate times, and to clarify areas of concern and confusion. In addition, the collaboration between academic and professional staff enabled the identification and provision of information at appropriate times during the semester, based on historical knowledge of student needs, and university processes and requirements.

The planning for mentoring sessions then involved an emergent process of data gathering from students, academics and professional staff, using live, latent and historical data to inform the planning and delivery of the weekly sessions. The emergent design underpinning this program enabled the diverse needs of individual students to be addressed as they progress through the semester. Planning for the mentoring sessions was also informed by Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (Maslow, 1943), in identifying and prioritising the provision of information and reiterating contact details of relevant support services.

Though this approach was intended to benefit all students, the program was specifically targeted at supporting students from low socio-economic and for non-traditional university-entrant backgrounds. Vygotskian notions of the socio-cultural basis of knowledge construction (Wertsch, 1985), and our successful engagement with the cultures of social groups and institutions, were engaged in the design of the peer-mentoring processes. The aim of this approach was to engage students' existing knowledges, and ways of being, in the process of building the cultural capital, the contextual socio-cultural knowledges, languages and ways-of-being, required for educational success (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977). In mobilising these theoretical perspectives, this program is designed to scaffold students in developing their knowledges of how to "do" university, by making the development of this "cultural capital" explicit, accessible and responsive to the diversity of students' individual needs and interests.

The program in detail

During their orientation and induction into their course, and within lessons during their first week of classes, students were encouraged to note down their questions as they arose during the week as preparation for the mentoring sessions. The mentoring process was also introduced during the first week as part of tutorial time in one of the classes, in order to demonstrate the process, and address any immediate questions. Following this introduction, students met with their PASS peer-tutor each week for one hour to study subject related content, with each session finishing with a peer-mentoring process.

In preparing for the mentoring sessions, students had been encouraged to diarise any questions, topics or concerns that arose during the course of the week and bring these to the PASS sessions. Questions were also added to these lists as students identified further questions during their PASS study sessions. Following the PASS session, the peer mentoring program engaged students in a cooperative learning process using a modified version of Think Pair Share.

The peer mentoring sessions started with each student reviewing their list of questions (think). Following this, students worked through their lists with a self-selected partner (pair) answering each other's questions. Unanswered questions were then noted on a separate sheet. Students then join with another pair, with these sheets forming the basis of discussion (share). Finally, questions/topics that remain unanswered are handed to the PASS leader for whole group discussion or further investigation. These lists were also collated and formed the basis

for discussion between academic and professional staff and the facilitators in preparing the following week's mentoring program.

While the combined PASS and peer mentoring process was intended to provide "just for me" support by providing each student with the opportunity to find answers to their individual concerns, it also provided a way of closing the loop between the need for information, and its provision at the course and university levels using a "just-in-time" model to improve communication of information and provide ongoing support to students in meeting and addressing subject, course and university processes and requirements. The regular presentation of details and contact information for support services was structured into sessions in order to normalise these within the university environment and build confidence in these services.

Intended benefits of the program

The aims of the program were to support students in their transition to the university environment, and scaffold their development of the cultural capital required for successful engagement in university studies. The program intended to create a regular space where students could easily access support. By placing peer-mentoring and PASS programs within a context of an aligned curriculum, support was aligned with the curriculum experience, making the provision of support and information relevant and responsive to individual student need.

The use of the cooperative learning process of think-pair-share was intended to encourage students to identify issues of concern in a safe environment by building in a process of increasing anonymity. The process also intended to build a culture of peer support and a sense of belonging within the cohort, as well as within the course and university. The program was also intended to create a meaningful space where academic and professional staff could provide information as it was required or relevant to students' needs. The program also offered a space to raise the profile, and student awareness, of other support services, normalising these services as part of the structures and resources for students, and encourage students to feel comfortable and safe in accessing them. This capacity building was intended to support students by "making familiar", what may be a socially and culturally unfamiliar learning, and living, environment.

Session outline

Whole Group discussion (5 mins) The challenges of third generation First Year Experience approaches

Presenters

1. The collaborative capacity building program, its structure and processes (5 Minutes)
2. Presentation of preliminary data analysis, identifying key elements of the mentoring sessions (quantitative data), and outcomes (qualitative data) (10 minutes)

Small group discussion Workshop participation: Small group discussions of (a) applicability of the program to own contexts (5 minutes); (b) key elements of the program, its challenges and opportunities for improvement (5 minutes); (c) reporting back and final audience questions (5 mins).

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