



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Transforming Knowledge into Wisdom

Holistic Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Proceedings of the

27th HERDSA Annual Conference

4-7 July 2004

Miri, Sarawak

Devereux, L. (2004) When Harry met Sarita: Using a peer-mentoring program to develop intercultural wisdom in students, in *Transforming Knowledge into Wisdom, Proceedings of the 27th HERDSA Annual Conference, Miri, Sarawak, 4-7 July 2004: pp 146.*

Published 2004 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155-6223
ISBN: 0 90 8557 58 2

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When Harry met Sarita: Using a peer-mentoring program to develop intercultural wisdom in students

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Abstract: *This paper offers a practical and innovative model for enhancing intercultural skills and providing opportunities for meaningful social contact between Australian and international students. The information will assist practitioners considering similar programs for students.*

Studying at university is a social and cultural experience as well as an educational one, and students benefit from developing abilities to interact with people from different backgrounds in addition to acquiring knowledge and skills. The presence of international students on Australian campuses presents opportunities for students of all backgrounds to develop intercultural understanding. However, universities may need to put more effort into promoting meaningful social contact between local and overseas students if intercultural wisdom is to be developed among students.

In response to this challenge, the University of Canberra developed and implemented a group model of peer-mentoring in which leadership pairs (one Australian and one international student) mentored small groups of overseas students. The program was designed through a synthesis of models offered in the literature and through a consultative process with students themselves.

Thirty-two volunteer student leaders were trained to provide social support to new arrivals during the first five weeks of semester. The leaders' experiences were evaluated using surveys and independently run focus groups. Both international and Australian student leaders reported benefiting from their experiences in the program. Program leaders felt that the training and support that they received, as well as being part of a recognised and supported peer-mentoring program helped them to feel more confident in interacting with students from cultural backgrounds different to their own. The University community also derived benefit from the intercultural communication skills the participants developed and the culture of inclusiveness and social tolerance modelled in the program design.

Keywords: *Mentoring; peer support; intercultural skills.*

Introduction

This study focused on the need to improve social support for new international students at an Australian university. Staff at the University of Canberra researched, piloted and evaluated a peer-mentoring program for new students. This paper offers a practical model for increasing social support for new students which also led to enhanced social contact between Australian and international students.

Review of the literature

There is a growing body of research suggesting the need to adopt a more holistic approach to assisting students at tertiary institutions to accomplish “total student development” for lifelong learning, and this requires universities to see students as whole, complex people with multi-faceted lives rather than simply as “study machines” (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Gardner, 1999; McInnis & James, 1995; Good, Halpin & Halpin 2000; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000). Students interviewed about non-academic factors that impacted on their academic achievement identified social needs (such as a lack of guidance and direction, and a sense of isolation and distress) as issues affecting both academic performance and adjustment to university life (Walker, 1999). Similarly, commencing students at the University of Adelaide identified common concerns including nervousness about coping academically and socially in the university environment (Walker, 2001). Moreover, it appears that the support given to students on arrival at university can make a difference to their reported emotional balance later in the year and this suggests that all staff involved with first year students share a responsibility to make the induction to tertiary study as satisfying and supportive as possible (Stevens & Walker, 1996).

For international students, difficulties in adjusting to university can be exacerbated by the extra demands of adjusting to life and study in a new language and a different cultural setting (Armitage, 1999; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000). Concerns expressed by overseas students include adjusting to the Australian accent, making friends amongst the local students and developing a sense of acceptance (Walker, 2001). Speaking English can also cause difficulty, especially in class discussions and in social relationships (Smart et al., 2000). One proposed solution is to provide opportunities for international students to “feel welcome” in Australia and to interact more with Australian students (Choi, 1997; Smart et al., 2000).

The need to pay greater attention to the social needs of international students is also highlighted in the work of Smith, Lambert, Knox and Foster (2000) and Smith, Morey and Teece (2002). These authors argue that educational institutions could “improve international student attitudes about living in Australia by developing programs designed to increase the interaction between Australian and international students, and the level of tolerance towards international students by Australian students” (Smith et al., 2002, p. 20). However, students may not develop the necessary inter-cultural communication skills to rise to this challenge by themselves, and universities may need to provide direct teaching of skills, support, and opportunities for local and overseas students to interact productively (Smart et al., 2000).

One way in which education providers have been attempting to meet the challenge of assisting students in their adjustment to tertiary study is through peer-mentoring programs. Topping (1998), in a review of peer support programs in higher education, found that such programs can be effective in “achievement gains, reduced student stress, graduation outcomes and dropout rates” (in Kowalsky & Fresko, 2002, p. 262). There are many models of such programs and these vary greatly in their purposes and scope. Some programs focus on academic support (e.g., Supplemental Instruction, University of Missouri, 1997) and others provide a mix of academic and social support (e.g., Mellberg & Engstrom, 1999). Some programs are based on a one-to-one relationship between a mentor and a “mentee” (e.g., Good et al., 2000; Kowalsky & Fresko, 2002), while other schemes are “group” models. A number of Australian universities use senior students as guides during orientation programs, and some extend this support to provide follow-up contact (e.g., Bowie, 1999). Some programs are for one day (e.g., Peat, Dalziel & Grant, 2001); others last for a whole year (e.g., Quintrell &

Westwood, 1994). The availability of a range of models suggests that it is important for institutions to have a clear idea of what they hope to achieve from a peer mentoring program before they select an approach to implement.

Background

The model of peer-mentoring developed at the University of Canberra (UC) is not only based on the literature, but also on the expressed needs of international students on campus and the staff who support them. Through a consultative process, UC developed a program which provides training and support for program leaders so that they can offer practical help and friendship to new international students. In addition the program has increased the social contact between Australian and overseas students on campus.

UC is one of the smaller Australian universities with 10,000 students, 1,900 of whom are full fee paying international students or exchange students from overseas. Each semester, the University runs orientation programs for all students during designated Orientation weeks. Senior UC students are trained as OWLs (Orientation Week Leaders) to act as guides for their peers. Extending this peer support beyond the orientation weeks had been discussed, indeed it was happening informally. However, as the number of international student enrolments increased, an informal approach became difficult to sustain, and there was support from staff who work with overseas students to develop longer term peer support.

Needs analysis

To gain a clearer picture of the needs of overseas students at UC, three focus groups based on the model described by Swanson and Moon Gorder (1999) were facilitated with 11 students from a range of cultural and study backgrounds. The students were asked about:

- Their experiences as new students in Canberra and at UC;
- People and services they had found helpful;
- Areas of difficulty in adjusting to life at UC;
- Strategies for overcoming the specific difficulties they had identified; and,
- Suggestions for a peer-mentoring program for new overseas students.

The students had many positive things to say about their experiences at UC, and they were able to identify sources of support that they had used to assist their adjustment to tertiary study. However, the students also identified a number of concerns that were relevant to the development of an extended peer-mentoring program.

Students who missed the Orientation Programs were less satisfied with their first few weeks in Canberra than the students who had taken part in this process. These students reported a lack of information about what to expect in a new city, and about basic needs such as transport, shopping, weather conditions, cooking and food sourcing. For example, one student (living in non-catered accommodation) commented that it was three days before she worked out where the supermarket was.

All the students reported some sense of isolation and loneliness. Many felt language difficulties, and a lack of appreciation of the problems this caused them, were contributing factors to a sense of isolation.

“Nobody ever says ‘well done, [name]’, like at home ... There is not much appreciation of the effort international students are making. Everyone focuses on the faults.”

Several students reported that these difficulties restricted them socially,

“The greatest problem was that ... my English was not too good to communicate with Aussies”

as well as in classes:

“All the Australian people are going to the same group [choosing groups in tutorials for group activities] and automatically we international people are becoming isolated ... from the Australian people ... we can’t communicate with each other.”

Some students suggested that racist attitudes contributed to segregation and isolation of overseas students.

“It is very hard when international students are in a minority group. ... Our accent disadvantages us ... I found when I do speak in the class, maybe my pronunciation is not very clear, [and] I saw some students laughing and making jokes. I mean it is hidden ... it is not that expressed, but I saw something going on.”

“I think it’s [discrimination] different according to skin colour ... especially for Asians”

“And some teachers utter in class, ‘Oh you’re from Asia. [There] might be problems with your English!’”

In addition, several overseas students observed a lack of integration between different cultures on campus. Many had never been away from their home country before and they were under-prepared for the multicultural experience of living and studying in Australia.

Finally, a number of students commented that if they were unhappy, they did not have enough information about complaint procedures.

“We need to know how to complain about things. I ... do not know how to complain about the attitude or the performance of the tutor. I really don’t know how to make a complaint, or express my opinion.”

The UC model

To address these concerns and to assist new students to adjust to life at UC, focus group participants suggested recruiting and training student leaders for a “Buddy Program” based on a group model of peer-support. The students felt that such an approach offered new students a network of social support, access to practical help and information, and a referral service to other areas of support within the University.

Forty students were selected as leaders for the program through a rigorous recruitment process. The successful applicants attended a meeting where they developed the scope of the

program in more detail. With the focus groups' experiences and suggestions in mind, the new Buddy Program Leaders (BPL) decided that the main aims of the UC pilot Buddy Program would be to:

- Provide social support for new international students through group activities;
- Offer practical help and information; and,
- Complement and publicise existing UC services.

The main elements of the model designed by the BPL are:

- That it is “student owned”;
- It is a group model;
- Each small group has two volunteer BPL, one Australian and one international student leader (preferably one female and one male);
- BPL jointly work out social activities based on the needs of new students, although they may also meet new students individually;
- BPL are trained and supported by a paid coordinator; and,
- The formal program lasts until the fifth week of semester.

An additional function of the first meeting with BPL was to design the scope of the training workshops. The BPL participated in a brainstorming session on what they anticipated they would need to know in order to support new overseas students. The ideas collected from the brainstorming session, in addition to the needs expressed in the focus groups, were used to develop the training workshops.

Training workshops

Thirty-two leaders attended two days of training covering:

- Leadership;
- Security and safety;
- Knowledge of UC campus and Canberra;
- Referral to support services at UC;
- UC policy on discrimination, sexual harassment and complaints procedures;
- Activities for new students;
- Cross-cultural knowledge; and,
- Intercultural communication skills.

The training was interactive, with guest speakers to add variety and to “put a face” to the services on campus, and opportunities for overseas and Australian students from multicultural backgrounds to share their knowledge and experiences with their peers were offered. During training, each Australian student leader was paired with an international leader and BPL spent time getting to know each other and jointly planning the program of activities for “their” group of new students.

Matching BPL with new students

The pilot scheme was not designed to support all new international students and so those who missed the Orientation Programs were given priority. However, UC staff members could also refer any student whom they felt would benefit from extra support. New international students were matched, as much as possible, with BPL from similar backgrounds and/or areas of study. BPL were given the new student's contact details and it was then up to them to establish communication with the new students.

Seventy-four new international students were assisted as part of the pilot Buddy Program in a variety of ways consistent with the aims of the program.

Evaluation of the innovatory Buddy Program

The Buddy Program was evaluated through questionnaires and independently run focus groups. The aim was to identify strengths and weaknesses in the model. Although the numbers of students involved was small (one third of the BPL returned the questionnaires and five participated in the focus group at the conclusion of the program) the information collected was useful for future planning.

In both the questionnaires and the focus groups, the Australian and the international BPL reported a high level of satisfaction with the training and support. They felt that the training helped to clarify their role, and increased their intercultural awareness in general and awareness of the initial problems of international students in particular. BPL felt that the training helped them to learn more about Canberra and UC and about the specific support and resources on campus. They found it particularly valuable to have people come to talk about the various services as this clarified what service providers did and reminded BPL that they were available. One Australian BPL from an Anglo Celtic background commented that the training, and being part of the program, “gave her permission” to approach students from different cultural backgrounds on campus and this helped her to overcome her reticence and fears. Similarly, an international student BPL commented that the experience helped him to learn how to “communicate with Aussies”.

Similarly, both the questionnaires and the focus group data demonstrates that working with a co-leader was a valued aspect of the model. BPL appreciated the support provided by having a co-leader and the shared sense of responsibility for their group. They felt that having two leaders provided flexibility, the opportunity to pool resources, knowledge and skills, and to share leadership based on time availability. Even where the two BPL did not work closely together, they enjoyed knowing that they had a partner if they needed one. BPL also reported increased cross-cultural skills through working in a joint leadership role with somebody from a different culture.

BPL valued many aspects of their leadership experience such as helping others, providing friendship and learning about other cultures, although they found time constraints imposed by their study and other commitments and organisational problems, particularly those associated with getting individuals together, as well as meeting the needs of new students, difficult at times.

Discussion

All the BPL felt that they gained from helping new international students settle in to UC. In addition, they valued the friendship and intercultural communication skills they developed and their increased knowledge of the University and the Canberra region.

The training provided to BPL was an important contributor to the success of the program. BPL reported that it was during the training that they began their inter-cultural friendships, and for some students the relationships that they developed with other BPL was their first real intercultural friendship. It seems that intercultural training of this type is not often offered to students, and the pilot program offered an opportunity to train an enthusiastic, supportive and

receptive group of students in how to successfully and confidently communicate with those from a different cultural background to their own. In addition, the BPL then had an opportunity to practice these skills in meaningful situations where they were helping others. In the preliminary focus groups, there was a strong feeling among international students that more needs to be done to break down barriers between Australian and overseas students at UC and to combat racist attitudes on campus. The training sessions provide an opportunity to influence a number of students and this may help to promote a more culturally aware and inclusive campus. In addition, pairing international and Australian student leaders in the pilot program provided an opportunity for positive role modelling of effective intercultural communication skills to the new overseas students in their groups. This is important, because some international students have no intercultural skills when they arrive in Australia, especially if they come from countries where there is very little cultural diversity (Armitage, 1999).

The sense of “ownership” that students felt for the Buddy Program helped to ensure its success. A number of students were involved from the initial focus groups to the final evaluation. These students were able to provide effective feedback on the rationale behind the program throughout the process of development and implementation. This helped to maintain enthusiasm and support for the project among BPL. Clearly, the quality of the leaders contributes to a program’s success (Mellberg & Engstrom, 1999).

BPL feedback on the pilot Program demonstrates that supporting program leaders is important in a mentoring program. Throughout the pilot Buddy Program, BPL regularly communicated with the project officer by telephone and by email and through regular face-to-face contact. Although it was time-consuming providing this level of support, responses indicate that BPL valued feeling that they had the support of the University in their role.

Screening leaders effectively is also important and needs to be done thoroughly. The BPL work in what is potentially a very close relationship with the new students and they do so at a time when some new students feel particularly vulnerable. Thus, the host university has a responsibility to screen, train and support program leaders to ensure that they are responsible, reliable, and behave ethically.

Although the students involved in the pilot program reported many positive benefits, some challenges remain unresolved. The students in the initial focus group suggested that tertiary teaching staff do not always make enough effort to encourage a supportive learning environment. Peer mentoring programs alone will not resolve such difficulties and as Smart et al. (2000) argue, a proactive, institution-wide commitment to improving intercultural wisdom is required.

Conclusion

Universities have much to gain from peer support programs, but to be effective such programs need to be adequately resourced. In addition, a key element in the success of a peer-mentoring program clearly lies in recruiting appropriately skilled staff and Buddy Program leaders. Program coordinators must be experienced in intercultural communication and willing and able to work intensively for the duration of the program.

Both international and Australian student leaders benefited from being part of a peer-mentoring program for new overseas students at UC. They felt that the training and support

that they received, as well as being part of a recognised Buddy Program helped them to feel more confident in interacting with students from cultural backgrounds different to their own. The University community has also derived benefit from the intercultural communication skills that the participants developed and the culture of inclusiveness and social tolerance modelled in the program design.

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Acknowledgements

The UC pilot Buddy Program was funded from an Australian Government HEEP Award for Services to International Students. The Program's success was also ensured by the enthusiastic support and encouragement of Kate Wilson and by the assistance of Noor Fleming, Mandy Scott, and Adi Firth who designing the Buddy Program logo.

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