

Professional Development as Peer Mentorship in the Trichotomous Classroom

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Introduction and Need for Innovation

Traditionally, a mentor is defined as a person who is senior in age and/or experience who guides someone through personal and professional development (McManus & Russell, 2007). However, Kram and Isabella (1985) suggest individuals often rely on their peers for guidance towards developmental support and mentoring. McDaugall and Beattie (1997) define peer mentoring as “a process where there is mutual involvement in encouraging and enhancing learning and development between two peers” and this process commonly assists people in gaining and improving skills related to their careers. While traditional mentorship relationships largely provide one-sided benefits to the relationship, peer mentorship offers a symbiotic relationship benefitting both parties and are a key source of developmental support and assistance (McManus & Russell, 2007). The peer mentoring process is commonly reflected in educational settings through professional development. The theoretical underpinnings of this idea include a merging of social learning theory (SLT) and social comparison theory (SCT) in an effort to explain how individuals learn and develop through relationships with peers. SLT suggests individuals learn through observation and imitation (Bandura, 1971). SCT suggests people tend to compare themselves to others driving them to improve skills and behaviors (Festinger, 1954).

How it Works

In an effort to take advantage of interactions that occur when merging different student groups with similar academic interests into one course, East Texas A&M University offers select online graduate level Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications (ALEC) courses to a trichotomy of student groups. These groups represent currently employed school-based agricultural science educators (SBAE), alternative certification seeking pre-service SBAEs, and agricultural leadership, education, and communications students not interested in a career including formal educational settings. All students enrolled in ALEC 535-Leading and Communicating Contemporary Issues in Agriculture were required to study the same course-related concepts and complete the same assignments and activities including a capstone assignment using project-based methods to facilitate peer mentorship. This was facilitated by requiring students to create professional development content i.e. Mini-PD for their course peers’ personal and professional development. This activity provided students great latitude in an effort to create unique professional development opportunities, rooted in students’ existing strengths, to benefit each student group. Students were given the option of working within a group or individually. Students were encouraged to consider their own talents, strengths, and experiences to develop their Mini-PD and could include the creation of training and/or educational opportunities related to a policy, bill, act, or law, education on grant navigation, knowledge acquisition facilitation towards pedagogical or andragogical skill development, or a contemporary agricultural issue. They could create Mini-PD that included, “tips, tricks, plan, handouts, resources etc.,” or use the National FFA Leadership Development Event, Agricultural Issues Forum, as a model to present the pros and cons of a contemporary agricultural issue. The Mini-PD needed to be 30 minutes in length and was presented “as if you were at a associated professional conference.” Additionally, the activity required the Mini-PD to include physical artifacts the peer audience could access for additional

understanding and/or information i.e. worksheets, informational sheets, bulletins, outline of the presentation, PowerPoint slides, etc. The Mini-PD presentations were uploaded to a closed Facebook group and physical artifacts were linked or submitted within the D2L Brightspace course shell. Post Mini-PD presentations, students completed critiques of their peers' Mini-PD presentations further developing students' skills in identifying and articulating the components of effective and informative professional development.

Results

This activity received an overwhelmingly positive response from students in terms of active participation, excitement levels observed and reported, and in the effort applied to the completion of the assignment. Topics presented mirrored the diversity of the curriculum and students of the course. Mini-PD topics were reflective of SBAE professional development and the broader non-formal educational interests and included titles such as: Working with 504, SPED, and Inclusion Students in Project-Based Ag Science Courses, Student Engagement, Technology in the Classroom, How to Facilitate a District FFA Convention-Advisor View, Burnout in Agriculture Educators, How to Prepare a Show Steer, and Streamlining Curriculum Development for Teachers. Also: Urban Sustainability, Incorporating Ag into the Non-Ag Classroom, Growing Gardens and Growing Minds, Agricultural Advocacy, Texas 4-H Adult Volunteer Training, Promoting Sustainability through Microgreens. Students used a variety of delivery methods to accomplish the goal of the assignment including PowerPoint presentations, recorded video with narration of live events, panel discussions, podcasts, instructor-led training, micro learning, and interview with "the expert." Student critiques of the exercise echoed the positive experience observed by the instructor of the course including complimentary comments on content knowledge and skill of presenters, comments discussing delivery method and organization, appropriateness and relevance of topics, acquisition of practical and relevant knowledge, and appreciation of the provided artifacts for further independent education.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

This innovative idea was field-tested in a shortened "Winter Mini" semester requiring students to consider, develop, and present Mini-PD within rapid timeframe. Based on student feedback, this idea will be included in a long semester course and the researcher will explore the experience of peer mentorship in the cross-listed classroom. Particularly effective and relevant ALEC 535 Mini-PD presentations will be used to further inform undergraduate ALEC majors and pre-service SBAE students. In using Mini-PD critiques to facilitate reflection on Mini-PD presentations it was discovered students do not necessarily understand how to facilitate practical application of learned knowledge and skills. This provides opportunities for faculty utilizing this activity to facilitate this part of the pedagogical process.

Costs and Resources

Implementation of this idea required student enrollment in an online East Texas A&M University course with an existing D2L Brightspace course shell. Students already largely possess access to technology enabling them to record and upload a video to a Facebook account at no additional cost. Therefore, all that is needed to implement this innovation is to include the Mini-PD assignment in an appropriate course and student time.

References

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