

Peer Mentoring in the Cross-Listed Classroom

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Introduction and Need for Innovation

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). An added benefit, is research suggesting a correlation between professional development and career satisfaction (Easterly & Myers, 2019). 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

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 was included in a long semester course and the researchers explored the experience of peer mentorship in the cross-listed classroom. East Texas A&M University cross-lists select courses to both graduate and undergraduate Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications (ALEC) students. These students represent school-based agricultural science educators (SBAE) enrolled in ALEC 531-Experiential Learning Theory and Application in Agricultural Career and Family Education and undergraduate students completing their pre-service teaching requirements enrolled in AGED 404-Supervised Experience Programs. All students enrolled in the cross-listed courses were expected to engage with identical course content and complete uniform assignments and activities, apart from the ALEC 531 capstone project. This project employed project-based learning strategies to promote peer mentorship and collaborative learning by requiring ALEC 531 students to create professional development opportunities for their AGED 404 cross-listed course peers. This activity afforded much independence to ALEC 531 students in an effort to create unique professional development opportunities, rooted in students’ existing strengths, yet focused on formalized agricultural education at the post-secondary level. Students were encouraged to reflect on their individual talents, strengths, and prior experiences to create the Mini-PD. The goal communicated to the students was to: “share knowledge and wisdom from those currently working in these fields with those who are new to these careers. For example: What do you wish you had known sooner? What knowledge or skill are you proficient in that you think others would benefit from as well? What knowledge and/or skills do you possess you believe others could benefit from?” The Mini-PD needed to be 30 minutes in length and to include physical artifacts the peer audience could access for additional understanding and/or information i.e., worksheets, informational sheets, 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. Both student groups engaged in peer critiques of the Mini-PD presentations, thereby further enhancing their ability to identify and articulate the essential components of effective and informative professional development sessions or activities.

Results

This activity elicited positive responses from both groups of students, particularly in relation to the frameworks offered by SLT and SCT, emphasizing the role of peer interactions such as observation, imitation, and comparison in individual learning and development. Interestingly, students enrolled in ALEC 531 demonstrated the highest levels of interest, expressing intention to apply the newly acquired knowledge. This enthusiasm was due to the practical insights shared by their SBAE peers, reinforcing the findings of Easterly and Myers (2019) suggesting a positive correlation between meaningful professional development experiences and career satisfaction. Topics presented reflected the diversity of the areas of responsibility of the ALEC 531 students and included titles such as: *Managing Middle School Ag*, *Introduction to Wool Judging*, *Growing Knowledge: Experiential Learning Through Sustainable Micro-Farming*, *Growing Minds: Creating an Indoor Classroom Garden*, *Creating a Brand Kit for your Chapter: The Why and How To!*, *Practical Marketing for Your FFA Program*, *Student and Project Management*, *Using Student Gardens for Good: Planning and Pitching it to Admin*, *CTE: An Introduction to Career and Technical Education in Texas*, *The Importance of CTSO Organizations*, *Ag Mech SAEs: How to Supervise Students Building a Trailer from Start to Finish*, *Beef Carcass Processing*, *Intro to Woodworking*, *Ag Mech: Things to Know!*, *Homecoming Mums: Tips and Tricks*, and *AET: The Basics*. Students used a variety of delivery methods to accomplish the goal of the assignment including recorded video with narration of live events and instructor-led training. 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, appreciation of the student(s) for sharing specific information, 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

Particularly effective and relevant ALEC 531 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. Analysis of the Mini-PD critiques, used as a tool to facilitate reflection, revealed that students, particularly at the undergraduate level, lack a clear understanding of how to support the practical application of acquired knowledge and skills. This insight presents an opportunity for faculty to intentionally address this aspect of pedagogical development during the undergraduate phase of the teacher preparation 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.

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