

Chapter XXIV

Integrating Student Peer Mentoring Online

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a mixed study dealing with the impact of integrating student peer mentor facilitators into online discussions in an effort to improve the quality and effectiveness of collaborative learning. The study included developing and testing of an assessment scale for measuring students' perceived peer mentoring course satisfaction. During the five-week study, training interventions were implemented in the third week. The study tested whether college students' perceived peer mentoring course satisfaction scores increase as a result of the peer mentoring training intervention. The resulting increasing quantitative mean score trend combined with positive qualitative feedback provided evidence of an overall growth in students' perceived peer mentoring community satisfaction, worthy of further investigation. The assessment instrument created has positive implications for online collaboration at all education levels.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the implementation of student peer mentors to facilitate online dialogue or conversations used for learning. Peer mentors are defined as students sharing the responsibility for generating and posting questions, responding

to others, asking further questions to clarify understanding, guide, support, and provide summary comments to facilitate building the collective knowledge base. "In a collaborating stance, the mentor and protégé codevelop the information pool" (Lipton, Wellman, & Humbard, 2003, p. 24). With the information pool referring to the

collective knowledge generated through interactions directed towards learning.

Study results for students' perceived satisfaction with the use of peer mentoring are reported in an effort to improve the quality and effectiveness of collaborative online e-learning environments. According to Harasim "collaboration enhances connectivity and socioemotional engagement to the learning process, as well as creating an intellectual climate that encourages participation" (Harasim, 1990, p. 54). By allowing each student to serve in a leadership position, personal and collective responsibility for collaborative group learning can emerge.

The research was designed to explore whether implementation of student peer mentors serve to increase students' perceived satisfaction. The potential benefits of using student peer mentors include increasing student responsibility and engagement in learning by sharing the leadership role. Students benefit from diverse views shared by peer mentor facilitators, rather than with one instructor alone. By sharing the facilitation tasks, instructors can focus their efforts on designing effective instructional materials while concentrating on proven learning strategies and high quality learning activities. Students' alternated serving as peer mentors to generate and post thought provoking questions based on the weekly reading materials. In addition, student mentors facilitated online text based dialogue used for learning by providing timely feedback, additional probing questions, resources, confirmation, support, and summary statements as appropriate. Various peer mentors shared the workload and ensured quality was maintained. Student satisfaction was measured both prior to implementation and after implementation to measure any changes in student perceived peer-mentoring satisfaction.

Magennis and Farrell (2005) found a 90% retention rate when teaching new material to others and a 75% retention rate through practice by doing, as found in peer mentoring. Together they appear to provide an added retention benefit. Mentoring

has the potential to provide each student with autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000) through alternating leadership roles. The use of peer mentors provides a strategy for engaging learners collaboratively within the online threaded discussion forum. Additionally, students can be very creative when posting intriguing and challenging questions for peers while tapping into the language of youth in many unique ways.

BACKGROUND

As pointed out by DuBois and Archer (2004), mentoring has a long history in human writings, originating in ancient Greece. As recorded in Homer's *Odyssey*, before Odysseus sailed away to war, he entrusted his son to the care of Mentor, an older wise man. It is believed that the existence of mentoring predates writing and Homer, reaching back to the time of early hunters and gatherers. Today, a tremendous resurgence of interest in mentoring is occurring in such diverse groups as commercial industries, government, "not-for-profit organizations, corporations, and legislative initiatives at state and national levels" (DuBois & Archer, 2004, p. 2). The growing interest includes scholars in many disciplines.

With so many types of mentoring being used by so many different interest groups, it is a little tricky to define. Mentoring is often associated with volunteer organizations where older individuals serve as mentors. However, mentoring in the workplace is growing as a way to facilitate workers learning from one another and assisting "in issues to do with professional development, and improved effectiveness" (Holbeche, 1996, p. 24). During 2000, "71% of the Fortune 500 companies used mentoring" (Sweeny, 2002, p. 1). Peer mentoring is not commonly used, as many educators have not considered its use in an educational setting. By broadening the scope of the mentoring definition, many possibilities can be created to foster positive collaborative social relationships directed toward

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