Capturing Peer-To-Peer Mentoring Advice:
A Podcast Series for First-Year Law Students.
A Practice Report

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Abstract

This practice report provides an overview of a podcast series designed to support first-year student transition to university and promote wellbeing and belonging. The podcast was established in 2017 in a compulsory first year law subject (Legal Institutions and Methods) at La Trobe University, Australia. The podcasts record interviews with students who have recently completed the subject and are designed to (a) give interviewees an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and (b) provide advice to future commencing law students (i.e., their peers). The podcast is a form of peer-to-peer mentoring that requires a relatively small investment of resources and provides on-demand support to students as they commence their law studies. The concept is readily adaptable to other disciplines.

Introduction and Overview

Commencing university studies is an exciting and nerve-wracking time for students (Webster et al., 2018). The first year of law study may involve heightened excitement and nervousness because it is a discipline that many students grow up wanting to study and many experience family pressure to do so. Some are unable to commence their law studies until of mature age. It is also a degree with a reputation for being challenging and involving an intense workload. Students may feel trepidation about the demands of studying law, combined with expectations developed over many years preceding their acceptance into the degree (for an empirical study of student reasons for studying law see Larcombe et al., 2008). At universities with a large proportion of students who are the first in their family to study at university, there may also be students who lack confidence and family support surrounding the requirements of tertiary study (Kift, 2015).

Peer mentoring is a well-documented method of supporting the transition to university (Ragavan, 2012; Rodrigo et al., 2014; Smith & Burton, 2013) and achieving one of the goals of transition pedagogy, which is to create a sense of belonging (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kift, 2015). However not all universities have the resources to establish a formal program linking later-year students to first-year students, particularly in light of post COVID-19 pandemic resource constraints.

A less resource-intensive form of peer-to-peer mentoring has been developed at La Trobe Law School, Australia, in the form of a podcast series. Students who have successfully completed the first-year compulsory subject *Legal Institutions and Methods* (LIM) in first semester are interviewed by the subject coordinator in second semester.

Over several years a repository of peer-to-peer advice has been captured for the benefit of commencing students, who are advised about the podcast series (a) when they attend their orientation program, (b) when they are welcomed to the subject via electronic communication and (c) in the first lecture of the semester. The podcasts remain available to students to refer to throughout the semester.

The podcast series has three aims. First it seeks to allay students' concerns about how difficult studying law might be (including reassuring them that they do not need background knowledge from a high school legal studies course). Secondly, it gives incoming students practical tips from their peers about a variety of matters related to successful completion of the subject. Thirdly, it is designed to generate excitement about the topics to be covered in LIM and assessment tasks they will be undertaking (particularly in relation to the assessment task involving a court report based on observations of a court hearing).

These themes could be readily adapted to other subjects or disciplines. In any first year subject students could benefit from reassurance about the skills they may have from high school that will set them up for success in the new area of study. Arguably all students can benefit from the advice of their peers who have completed the subject they are about to undertake.

The first section of this practice report explains the methodology for the podcast series and the limitations of the research to-date. The second section outlines the advantages of the podcast as a form of peer mentoring. Following this is an examination of the three aims of the series (referred to above) and the way it fosters the four pillars of engagement (Bowden et al., 2021), before the final section considers an additional benefit of the podcast for the students who are interviewed. They are introduced to reflective practice which is part of the 'self-managed' threshold learning outcomes for law degrees; one of the six threshold outcomes developed by Kift et al. in 2010. Transition pedagogy recommends that reflection be introduced as a skill in the first year of university study in order to promote "resilience" and foster student wellbeing (Noakes & Cody, 2022, p. 86).

Method

Background

La Trobe University has two urban campuses in Melbourne (one in the central business district [CBD] and another in the suburb of Bundoora) and regional campuses throughout the Australian State of Victoria. Law programs are taught across three campuses (the CBD, the suburban Bundoora campus and the regional campus in Bendigo).

LIM is taught across two campuses in first semester (Bundoora and Bendigo) and in Bundoora only in second semester. LIM introduces students to the Australian legal system with a particular emphasis on groups in the community that face barriers to access to justice. It also teaches students foundational skills, including legal research, legal problem-solving and written communication. There is a one-hour lecture (pre-recorded since 2020) and a two hour on-campus seminar per week (except in 2020 and 2021 when seminars were online). The major assignment is a court report, which requires students to observe a contested proceeding in a Victorian court then write a report about their observations.

Recruiting Interviewees for the Podcast Series

In 2017 the subject coordinator approached an engaged student who had attended all the on-campus lectures and seminars to assist in the development of a resource. This student indicated that they were very pleased to assist because when they commenced their studies, they had looked for a resource to help them and been disappointed that nothing suitable was available. A second student was recommended by the Bendigo seminar leader.

For later cohorts, who had had the benefit of access to recordings from the previous year/s, it was possible to put out a general call for volunteers at the end of the semester via the Learning Management System (LMS) noticeboard. The notice, sent to all students in the cohort, stated:

If you would like to be interviewed for a podcast containing advice for future LIM students (similar to the ones I made available to you at the beginning of this semester), please send me a quick email and I will make a note to contact you early in semester 2 (i.e., after you have finished your first semester subjects and had some time off).

The interviews take place after results are finalised, so that volunteering to be interviewed cannot influence, or be perceived to influence, interviewees' marks/grade in the subject.

Sometimes recruitment occurs informally. For example, there were two students who had both achieved excellent results in their exam in 2018 but later sought additional feedback on how to improve further. They had met that semester, formed a study group, and wanted to receive their exam feedback together (both consenting to their results being discussed in front of the other). During this consultation the subject coordinator asked if they had found the podcasts helpful at the beginning of the semester, to which they responded in the affirmative. They were then invited to be interviewed and indicated that they would like to be interviewed together, thus leading to a joint interview. This interview was very easy for the interviewer because the two students had a good rapport and bounced thoughts off each other with minimal prompting from the interviewer.

Participants

The overall aim in recruiting students over the years has been to achieve a balance of perspectives. Participating students have included:

- a mixture of male and female students (7 female and 4 male students have been interviewed),
- representatives of students from both campuses where the subject is taught (2 students from Bendigo and 9 students from Bundoora), and
- a mix of mature age students and those who have entered university directly from school (4 mature-age students and 7 school-leavers).

Questions and Content

The subject coordinator (interviewer) asks open questions that provide the interviewee with the opportunity to share their experiences of first semester law studies. These include questions such as, "what was a highlight of LIM for you?" and "what do you know now that you wish you knew at the beginning of the semester?"

Interviewees are sent the interview questions in advance so they can prepare, then the interview process takes about half an hour. The longest podcast in the series is 24 minutes but this is with two students who agreed to be interviewed together. The individual interviews are generally not longer than 15 minutes duration.

In 2021, three podcasts with a specific focus were recorded. These are podcasts about:

1. the experience of repeating the subject (because LIM is a compulsory subject, students who fail on their first attempt need to repeat),
2. online learning (mainly relevant during the pandemic), and
3. strategies for exam success.

Limitations

The best way to assess whether the podcast recordings support transition to university and achieve the aims of fostering belonging and wellbeing would be to survey or interview podcast users. This is an area for further study.

Advantages of Podcast Interviews for the Provision of Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

Podcasts are a one-way form of peer mentoring (compared to a mentoring program carried out face-to-face). Despite this perceived limitation, they have several advantages, particularly as universities attempt to re-engage students post-COVID-19.

The first advantage is that the advice has been 'captured' and is available equally to every incoming student in the subject across several years and may be accessed for several years after the interviews were conducted (this series commenced in 2017). Students are also able to access the advice from all the interviewees i.e., from a variety of mentors (Goodrich, 2021). This illustrates the program's flexibility. Incoming students do not need to enrol in a program or commit to specific time/s to gain the benefit of the mentoring. The podcasts are accessible to students via their subject LMS page, which means they do not have to log in to a separate website or seek out the information. They can listen to the podcasts after-hours when it suits them, they can pause them then resume later and they can listen to as many of them as they prefer, making the learning of mentees highly personalised (Goodrich, 2021, p. 264). In an empirical evaluation of a podcast series at the University of New England, Tynan and Colbran (2006) found that:

> The participants are clearly in favour of podcasting. They identified the ability to time shift and have control over the replay of auditory course material as major advantages … We were surprised that students (63.2%) placed such importance on podcasting as a support for studying subjects. (pp. 831-32)

The second advantage is the minimal resources (both time and financial) required by both interviewees and the subject coordinator. The time commitment required of interviewees is minimal, and much less than would be required as part of a formal peer mentoring program (e.g., the program outlined by Cornelius et al., 2016). The interviews take the subject coordinator slightly more time than the interviewees (planning the questions, recruiting the interviewees, scheduling a time then conducting the interview). When a face-to-face interview is conducted some travel time between campuses also needs to be factored in. Regional students may instead be willing to be interviewed via Zoom.

The third advantage is that all mentoring content is facilitated by the subject coordinator via the questions posed during the interview. Teacher facilitation of mentoring has been identified as an advantage in an online mentoring program (Goodrich, 2021). It is particularly advantageous if a mentor mentions something that is inaccurate or misleading because the interviewer can correct this during the interview. Correcting misinformation has also been identified as important in an online peer mentoring program (Goodrich 2021). A useful example is when one interviewee explained that he and his LIM friends went to different court hearings to ensure that they were not engaging in collusion. The subject coordinator then explained to listeners that it is acceptable for students to observe the same court hearing for the purposes of the assessment and that this does not constitute collusion, while emphasising that students need to ensure they write their assignment independently (which is the same advice provided to all students during seminars).

The final advantage is adaptability. The format may be used for any subject in any discipline, with appropriate tailoring. For example, in a later year subject, interviewees could be asked how this subject will build on prior subjects and/or what skills and knowledge students will draw on from previous subjects. Interviewees could also be asked what skills or graduate capabilities they learnt from the subject that they can subsequently rely on when applying for graduate positions (for both applications and interviews). However, it is recognised that students close to graduation may have less time for a podcast interview than students who are earlier in their degree.

Three Aims of the LIM Podcast Series

The three aims will now be discussed. They are:

1. allay incoming students' concerns about the difficulty of studying law,
2. give incoming students practical tips from their peers, and
3. generate excitement about the topics to be covered in LIM and assessment tasks to be undertaken.

These aims help address the four pillars of engagement developed by Bowden et al. (2021), which are 'behavioural, affective, social and cognitive'. Because engagement fosters student wellbeing, the four pillars therefore support one of the key objectives of the provision of podcast interviews to first year students (pp. 1212-1214).

Aim 1: Allay Incoming Students' Concerns About the Difficulty of Studying Law
The two main concerns that students identified when commencing LIM were:

1. that not having undertaken legal studies at school would put them at a disadvantage compared to their peers who had done legal studies, and
2. that studying law would be intense, largely theoretical and 'dry' or boring.

The interviewees provided plenty of reassurance about there being no need to have background knowledge from high school, including in many cases by reference to their own experience of either not having done legal studies, or having completed it approximately 10 years prior to enrolling in law at university. The interviewees emphasised that LIM is designed to ensure everyone is on a level playing field and that there is no need to be nervous. Allaying students' concerns may help to address 'imposter syndrome' and the "confusion, self-doubt and uncertainty" that many first-year students experience (McNamara et al., 2009, p. 7). It helps students feel a sense of belonging to the discipline (Kahu et al., 2017 Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kift, 2015; Mahoney et al., 2022) and to reduce their stress levels, which in turn supports student wellbeing (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

The interviewees also dispelled the myth that the subject is dry, boring or intense by speaking about things they personally found interesting. This also helped achieve the third aim of generating excitement.

Aim 2: Provide Practical Tips for Success From Their Peers

The interviewees provided a wide variety of tips for their peers in response to open questions such as, "what tips or advice would you provide to new LIM students?" "what do you know now that you wish you knew when you commenced LIM?" or "what was the key to your success?" (referring to passing the subject). The first year of university is when "attitudes towards the course, approaches to learning, and self-perceptions are developed" (McKenzie et al., 2004, p. 95). The podcasts allow the interviewees to articulate these attitudes and approaches, as well as assisting listeners to develop their own during their first year. This is connected to transition pedagogy, which refers to the importance of ensuring students are prepared for the academic requirements of the degree, and helping students set up "their self-efficacy and positive patterns and habits of study" (Kift, 2015, p. 54). Self-efficacy is also linked to student engagement in their studies (Kahu et al., 2017).

The focus on sharing practical tips for success with peers aligns well with empirical studies of more traditional peer mentoring programs that reveal that "[m]any of the participants felt that the programme helped them learn how to study within the university environment" (Cornelius et al., 2016, p. 201). Podcast interviewees spoke about the importance of attending seminars, asking questions of their teachers, and joining a study group. Interviewees refer to the need to develop their own methods for organising their studies and some explained in great detail how they did this.

The advice to attend classes will help students to achieve what Bowden et al. (2021) term "behavioural engagement", which they define as "the observable academic performance and participatory actions and activities" (p. 1212). Bowden et al.'s (2021) research found that behavioural engagement also drives self-efficacy.

When students listen to the advice of students who have completed the subject and choose to follow their peers' advice to form a study group, this helps to achieve another pillar of engagement, which is 'social engagement'. This form of engagement includes "bonds of identification and belongingness formed between students and their peers" (Bowden et al., 2021, p. 1212). This form of engagement also extends to students' connections with their teachers, with Bowden et al. (2021) arguing it can "foster equality between teachers and students" (p. 1220). The podcast fosters a direct connection between the subject coordinator and interviewees that listeners hear when they access the podcast series. Duffy et al.'s (2011) research has found that "students will better engage with their legal education if they are taught by academic staff who show a genuine interest in them" and the podcast enables the subject coordinator to demonstrate such an interest (p. 251).

Further, when students take the practical advice about organising their time it can foster the fourth pillar of engagement, which is 'cognitive engagement': "cognitively engaged students are more likely to demonstrate higher order thinking given their ability to be cognisant of the content, meaning and application of academic tasks" (Bowden et al., 2021, p. 1213).

Interviewees also spoke about the need for a work/life balance and the importance of self-care. The focus on self-care is particularly important given the well-established literature on the negative impact that studying law has on student wellbeing (e.g., Duffy et al., 2011; Field & Kift, 2010; Sifris & Marychurch, 2020). This goal also helps students to 'actively help themselves to cope with the rigours and stresses of law school' (Duffy et al., 2011, p. 253), which may promote better wellbeing throughout their degree.

Aim 3: Generate Excitement About the Topics to be Studied and Assessment Tasks to be Undertaken

The substantive LIM topic that interviewees identified as most enjoyable was access to justice. The court report assessment task was also something that a number of interviewees considered to be a highlight of the subject for them. This is because they enjoyed going to court and seeing 'law in action' and it got them thinking about whether they may wish to do this type of work after they graduate. The interviewees spoke about both of these topics in a manner that should get incoming students interested in what they will be learning in the subject. If it does not have this effect, then at least listeners have their peers' explanations to hear alongside their teachers' explanations.

These discussions help students achieve the fourth pillar of engagement, which is 'affective engagement'. This is defined by Bowden et al. (2021) as "heightened levels of positive emotions during on campus and off campus activities, which may be demonstrated through happiness, pride, delight, enthusiasm, openness, joy, elation and curiosity" (p. 1212). Bowden et al.'s research found that this type of engagement is the "primary determinant" of student wellbeing (p. 1219).

Interviewees Engaging in Reflective Practice

The reflection engaged in by interviewees was a somewhat 'hidden benefit' of the podcast series because the main focus when developing the resource was the benefits to the incoming students, rather than the benefits to the interviewees. However, it

has become increasingly apparent as more interviews are conducted that the interviewees gain more than the ability to list the interview on their CV and the knowledge that they have done something altruistic to assist future LIM students. This aligns with the outcomes of more traditional peer mentoring programs that have found that the "mentoring process provides active learning opportunities for the mentor as well, allowing the mentor to reflect upon and refine their own competencies" (Finlay-Jones & Ross, 2006, p. 26).

Interviewees are sent the questions in advance, giving them time to prepare for the interview. The initial aim of this was to ensure interviewees were more confident answering the questions during the recording of the interview, and it does achieve this aim. Another benefit, however, has been the extent to which interviewees have reflected on their own experiences of the subject and study practices employed (including their approach to assessments) and how they have been able to improve. The reflections have covered four themes.

The first theme—of most relevance to recent school-leavers—is the differences between school and university, including the experience of transitioning from the top of the class to being one among many high achievers. One student reflected on how they did not do as well as they expected in their first assessment task, but they sought extra feedback and were reassured by their teacher that there were other assessment tasks that could be used to improve their overall grade in the subject.

The second theme is the importance of not missing classes. After missing a couple of weeks of classes, one interviewee reflected on the personal impact of this, and why they recommend that their peers avoid missing classes (where possible). It is also beneficial for students to hear the joint interview with two students who became friends during class because it is then explicit that attending class provides the opportunity to form friendships, which improves students' sense of belonging (Picton et al., 2017).

The third theme is knowledge about study skills and assessments that can be applied in other subjects in the degree, beyond the first year. This advice includes not leaving assignments to the last minute and ensuring that you understand the assessment instructions before getting too far into writing an assignment.

The final theme is the way the subject impacted the interviewees' career motivation and generated passion and drive to help motivate them throughout the degree. For example, witnessing a prosecutor or defence lawyer in a court proceeding may influence a student to find out more about these as career options. One interviewee also said the subject opened their eyes to the role of lawyers in providing access to justice.

Conclusion

Universities are rightfully concerned with students' transition to university, creating a sense of belonging (which fosters engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2022)) and supporting wellbeing for the purposes of retention (with retention being one measure of student success (Mahoney et al., 2022)). Universities are also concerned because fostering student wellbeing will improve the overall student experience and the need for this has been particularly highlighted by the pandemic. Peer mentoring is a well-established method for achieving this, but it can be resource intensive and many face-to-face programs have been disrupted by the move to online learning during the pandemic.

Peer mentoring by podcast is a flexible means of delivering some of the benefits of more traditional peer mentoring programs. The podcast series in LIM has been shown to achieve the aims of allaying some of incoming students' concerns about the difficulty of studying law, providing practical peer-to-peer suggestions for success and generating excitement about the topics to be studied and assessment tasks to be undertaken. The themes foster the four pillars of engagement, which are affective, social, behavioural and cognitive engagement (Bowden et al., 2021). Being interviewed enables the students selected to engage in reflective practice—in itself an important professional skill.

The peer mentoring podcast is transferable to other disciplines. The recruitment methods would work for any subject, students are likely to be open to receiving practical suggestions from their peers who have already completed the subject regardless of the discipline, and listening to peers is likely to generate excitement about what lays ahead of them. Furthermore, interviewees will benefit from reflecting on their experience in any subject, as well as being able to put the interview on their CV.

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