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Gaining more than language: Reciprocal learning through a peer mentoring scheme

KATIE DUNWORTH
Curtin University

This paper describes the introduction and evaluation of a six-month peer mentoring scheme at one Australian university. The scheme was initiated with the primary aim of promoting the English language development of staff who have English as an additional language (EAL), a cohort which includes postgraduate students working as tutors. It was anticipated that the main outcome would be a perceived improvement in mentees' English language capabilities; but it was also envisaged that all participants would benefit from the intercultural experience inherent to the scheme. Program evaluations indicated that mentees were satisfied that they had benefited linguistically and that mentors believed that they developed a greater level of intercultural sensitivity and a more empathic understanding of the issues faced by EAL students and staff. The paper concludes by arguing that the approach adopted for the program may be applied in a range of TESOL contexts; not only for language development purposes but also to contribute to the building of intercultural awareness in a non-didactic and experiential way.

Keywords: *intercultural awareness; language development; peer mentoring*

Background

Peer learning has been adopted in many secondary and tertiary contexts in Australia, supported by cognitive development theory which places social interaction at the centre of the learning process (Ladyshewsky, 2006), in circumstances where participants "make sense of material by questioning, listening, communicating and explaining it to others" (Van der Meer & Scott, 2008, p. 75). As a concept underpinned by the Vygotskian view of learning as a social process (Wertsch, 1985), peer learning has long been regarded as an effective strategy in educational contexts for improving outcomes for participants.

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In its earliest manifestations it was conceived of as a form of surrogate teaching, involving a linear transmission of knowledge from mentor to mentee (Cunningham, 1999; Topping, 2005). Over time, however, the concept has evolved into a proliferation of forms, each bearing its own nomenclature according to its intended function. The term "peer tutoring", for example, is often used in educational contexts where there exists a hierarchical relationship between tutor who has expertise and the tutored who gains that expertise during the interchange (Topping, 2005). One of the potential issues with a "peer tutoring" paradigm, however, is the apparent oxymoron inherent in the terminology; it is difficult to reconcile traditional understandings of a tutor as the holder of superior knowledge with the equality of status that resides in a peer (Trimbur, 1987). The usual requirement in peer tutoring for tutors to undertake specific training in preparation for the process (Höysniemi, Perttu, & Turkki, 2003; Jones, Garralda, Li, & Lock, 2006) may further distance them from the "peer" component of their role.

"Peer mentoring" is a term commonly used when referring to peer learning in the workplace, as well as in educational contexts. This overarching description can incorporate "lateral, hierarchical and group mentoring" (McLoughlin, Brady, Lee, & Russell, 2007, p. 2). With regard to structure, peer mentoring programs can range from the informal and unplanned to the highly managed and institutionally sponsored (Foote & Solem, 2009, p. 48). There may also be variety in the model of practice. More recent schemes, for example, include e-mentoring, multiple mentoring (where mentees have more than one mentor), and team mentoring, where mentors have several mentees (Scandura & Pelligrini, 2010). Such diversity can extend, too, to issues such as the topics covered, the amount of mentor training and the duration of the mentoring activity. The breadth of the variety of activities linked to the term "peer mentoring" suggests that different contexts require different solutions; and that there is no optimal interpretation of good practice (Langer, 2010).

In spite of this heterogeneity, there are elements that appear to be common to all forms of mentoring: a dynamic relationship between individuals, a learning partnership, and a process defined by the kind of support provided (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2010). As a form of reciprocal peer learning, in which participants act as both teachers and learners (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999), peer mentoring may be perceived as involving an association of equals:

a "helping relationship in which two individuals of similar age and/or experience come together" (Terrion & Leonard, 2007, p. 150), traditionally for one or both of two purposes: to support career development or task completion, or to provide psychosocial support (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

The outcomes from mentoring programs are generally reported as positive, though not unconditionally. Reported benefits from staff mentoring programs include helpfulness of the mentor (Blackwell & McLean, 1996), the fact of having a mentor available (McAllister, Harold, Ahmedani, & Cramer, 2009), the impact of the experience on career development (St. Clair, 1994) and salaries (Ragins & Kram, 2007), as well as development as a professional, and induction into the normative practices of the institution (Carter & Francis, 2000). Mentors also report benefits in terms of personal satisfaction, organisational power and the rejuvenation of a career (Ramaswami & Dreher, 2010).

At the same time, positive experiences appear to be contingent on the presence of certain elements in any scheme. These include preparation of the mentor (Zachary, 2000), a formal structure and follow-up (Xu & Newman, 1987), adequate resourcing and support at an institutional level (Foote & Solem, 2009), the ability of the mentor to commit time (Terrion & Leonard, 2007), and careful matching of the mentor and mentee (Johnson & Ridley, 2004). Additionally, while the schemes may elicit affirmative feedback, "the effectiveness of mentor schemes is doubtful and further research is needed on the different models of mentoring and their relative impact" (Blackwell & McLean, 1996, p. 85).

The program that is the subject of this paper was originally conceived of as a dyadic peer tutoring program for English language growth, where self-selecting tutors would bring to the experience a greater level of language knowledge than the tutored. However, there was also an expectation that it would have a reciprocal peer mentoring function for all participants in terms of building a greater level of awareness of the culture of an unfamiliar discipline or organisational area within the university, and of facilitating interaction between staff from differing cultural backgrounds.

The program

The program, the staff English language mentoring scheme (SELMS), took place at the main campus of a university in Western Australia. The university is large, having one large central campus

and several satellite campuses in Australia as well as two overseas campuses and numerous international partners which offer its courses transnationally. Within this multinational and multicultural organisation, English is not the first language for many students and staff at the university. In 2010, for example, it enrolled over 16,000 international students, most of whom came from non-English speaking countries; while the number of EAL staff runs into the hundreds on the main campus in Australia alone.

The university's recruitment of large numbers of international students reflects practices at many other universities in Australia. One consequence of the presence of high numbers of EAL students on Australian campuses has been an extensive debate on the issue of student English language proficiency, with a considerable body of literature arguing for the need to enhance university students' English language capabilities (see, for example, Birrell, 2006; Bretag, 2007; Sawir, 2005). Concerns about the level of EAL staff's English language proficiency do not yet frequently appear in scholarly texts, but they are becoming more common, both in Australia and overseas. Examples include Klaassen and Bos (2010) and Victoria University (2005).

The SELMS was initially considered in response to this growing issue; expressed at the university through student complaints to staff and student-initiated reports from the university's student guild expressing concerns about the English language levels of some staff. While acknowledging that such complaints may occur for numerous reasons, only some of which may relate to issues of language proficiency, the university nevertheless felt obliged to respond, and tasked a TESOL staff member with investigating further.

A first step was to uncover the views of EAL staff themselves. This took the form of three focus groups comprising a total of 21 purposively sampled participants. The results indicated that within this group there was a substantial unmet desire and need for a professional development program that focused on the development of spoken and written English language skills within the university environment. It was also clear that the differing circumstances and needs of individual staff members required a flexible approach to program delivery. In consultation with staff, it was decided that the program would comprise three components: a set of face-to-face workshops on specific language topics identified in focus group discussions, a more detailed online course which contained input

materials, tasks and self-tests, and the SELMS which would take the form of a single mentor/mentee partnership. Participants would therefore have the opportunity to engage in learning in a social context in the workshops, focus on specific individual needs at times which suited them through the online course, and obtain individualised support for their learning over the longer term through the mentoring arrangement. The initial program, which was advertised on the institution's Intranet, was oversubscribed by 200%; however, it was limited to 35 participants for budgetary reasons. Of those 35 staff (both academic and administrative) who registered for the workshops, two thirds went on to participate in the SELMS.

As this was a program designed for adults with no direct reporting relationship in either direction, the parameters were deliberately kept broad. Following on from Blackwell and McLean (1996), it was believed that a light touch with regard to management and degree of formality would be preferable when working with staff (both mentors and mentees) who spanned almost all levels of seniority in both academic and administrative positions, and when the language needs of mentees might vary widely across individuals. In the peer-mentoring matrix below (Figure 1), the SELMS fell between the upper right and the lower right quadrant.

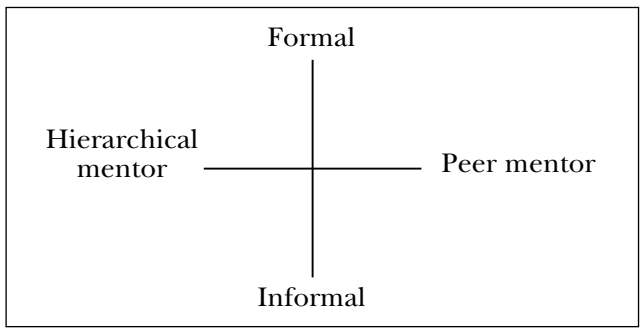

Figure 1: Peer mentoring matrix. Reproduced from Blackwell and McLean, 1996, p. 83.

In preparation for the mentoring process, participants were provided with an orientation. Mentees participated in a presentation session at the end of one of the workshops and were provided with general information about the program, which outlined the benefits of mentoring, the role of mentees and the boundaries of the relationship. Prospective mentors were drawn from the entire

staff population by invitation through a broadcast email. Those who responded were provided with information describing the benefits of mentoring, the role of the mentor, and what to expect from the experience. They were also invited to follow up individually with questions to the program organiser before committing themselves to the scheme. Ultimately, 20 volunteers were confirmed, of whom four were at the time in TESOL roles, while the remainder comprised both academic and administrative staff from a wide range of work areas.

Prior to commencement of the mentoring relationship, both members of the dyad were provided additionally with a set of ground rules, a guide for the management of the first meeting and a form to complete at the first meeting. The ground rules detailed the length of the relationship (six months), the recommended frequency and nature of meetings, the need for confidentiality, the facility for a "no-fault" withdrawal of either party at any time and the role of the program organiser. The meeting guide suggested three phases for the first meeting: discussion of overall objectives, discussion of specific language needs of the mentee and how they could be addressed, and discussion of arrangements for future meetings. The form was intended to provide a written record for both parties of the agreed meeting times, a list of objectives and details of mentor's and mentee's responsibilities.

For matching partners, a form completed by participants outlining their preferences was used. At the same time, given that the number of volunteer mentors was just below that of those seeking a mentor, the options were limited and required the allocation of multiple mentees to a few mentors. Participants were asked whether they would prefer a male or female partner, if they would prefer to work with a colleague from within or outside their immediate work area, and whether they would prefer to work with an academic or administrative staff member. No participant expressed a preference regarding gender. Two participants expressed a desire to pair with a colleague from a different work area, and one staff member requested a partner from her own work area. A small number of academic EAL staff requested a partner who was an academic rather than a member of the administrative staff, but most participants did not express a preference. Through this process all staff were matched. They were then informed by email of their partner's details, and mentors were requested to initiate the first contact.

From this point onwards, in accordance with the "light touch" approach that had been adopted to managing the scheme, participants were left to develop the process as they felt was appropriate for their particular circumstances. They were, however, made aware that the organiser was on hand should any difficulties eventuate. No mentees took advantage of this, but two mentors did; both TESOL practitioners within the university, they were concerned that their mentees were seeking guidance to a point that exceeded their expectations and availability. These issues were resolved in a discussion with the organiser, and no further action was requested. Over the course of the following six months, feedback on aspects of the SELMS (such as the content of mentoring sessions, frequency of meetings and the usefulness of the program) was provided through ad hoc informal discussions; but it was not until the program was formally evaluated through a survey at the end of the six month period that data were systematically collected and analysed. The results of this process are described in the next section.

Survey of participants

The survey instrument invited respondents through open-ended questions to outline their experience, list the benefits of the scheme, identify any drawbacks they had experienced and put forward suggestions for improving the program in the future. In total, 14 of the 20 mentors responded (70%), and 12 of the 23 mentees (50%). This was on the face of it a low response rate, which may have been because it was administered in December, when some participants, particularly those who were postgraduate students, were likely to have gone on leave.

The responses were analysed using a procedure, first developed by Miles and Huberman (1984), of data reduction, data display and the drawing of conclusions. Data reduction involves the selection, simplification and abstraction of the raw data. This first step was a comparatively straightforward process, given the low number of questions and the limited pool of respondents. Data display describes the organisation of information to facilitate the third step. For this study, the data were organised into six overarching categories: benefits for mentors, benefits for mentees, drawbacks for mentors, drawbacks for mentees, ideas for future improvements and general information about processes. Survey responses were colour-coded using words and phrases from shared semantic fields and then grouped; from this process emerged the

major themes. These were those themes which had breadth and depth; i.e. they appeared the most frequently, they were explained in the most detail and they appeared from the affective force of the language used (e.g. "great", "daunting", or the use of exclamation marks) to have had the most impact on participants.

Results

The responses from all participants were highly positive about the concept and the overall scheme, with many participants expressing their desire to see the program continue beyond a pilot. Overwhelmingly, the greatest benefit that mentors believed the experience had brought them was a greater understanding of and empathy for difference. Primarily this related to their mentee's different cultural background; for example, one respondent stated that it "provided an insight into a different culture" (Respondent 8), and another noted that she had had "lots of great conversations about cultural differences" (Respondent 10). Mentors also believed they had obtained a greater empathy for their mentees with regard to language; Respondent 2 claiming, for example, that the scheme "helped me to understand the perspective of a NESB staff member" (Respondent 2). Another wrote that it "gave me a more in depth appreciation of the challenges for an ESL speaker" (Respondent 8). Mentors, all of whom except two had been matched with a partner from a different department, also appreciated the opportunity of learning more about another academic or administrative area within the university. The responses under this theme can be summed up with a comment by Respondent 7: "I think this is a great program for staff in promoting cultural sensitivity".

A second concept that emerged was the development of personal relationships. Both mentors and mentees indicated that they valued the personal connection that had been made. Respondent 8, for example, commented that she had made "a new friend – met the whole family!" and others used words and phrases such as "became… friendly" (Respondent 2), "very personal" (Respondent 10), "[felt] appreciated" (Respondent 3) and "good communication" (Respondent 14). Some participants indicated that they intended to continue meeting once the organised program came to end.

A third theme was the belief expressed by mentees that they had improved their English as a consequence of the SELMS. The majority of respondents identified specific areas of progress, in

some cases providing a list of items where improvements had been made or where areas for improvement had been identified. Comments to illustrate this included: "…sometimes I cannot pronounce English words correctly, my mentor gave me a lot help on that, and I become more confident now when I speak in English" (Respondent 18); and "...my mentor helped me prepare a conference presentation which achieved good response in the conference" (Respondent 14). Two drawbacks of the scheme in its pilot format were clearly evident from the responses. First, both mentors and mentees identified lack of time to meet as a major issue. This was not a surprising finding, and one which has been identified frequently within the literature as a potential drawback (e.g. Barrera et al., 2010; Blackwell & McLean, 1996; Cunningham, 1999) if specific time release is not a component of the program, which in this case it was not.

A fourth theme that emerged related to the mentoring scheme process. It appeared that the "light touch" approach had left both mentors and mentees without sufficient support. The lack of detailed goals, roles and objectives was identified as a flaw by many mentors, even by those who had successfully negotiated outcomes with their mentee. For example, one mentor wrote: "My mentee has a very clear idea of what kind of help she needs. Without a clear idea of what needs tackling... I can see that there is a risk of the meetings simply being 30 minutes of vague conversation" (Respondent 11). Although some were comfortable with uncertainty, the overwhelming feedback from mentors was that the parameters should be more clearly defined. This desire for clearly articulated goals appeared to result from both mentors' personal sense of uncertainty about the value of their own input and a concern that their mentees' needs should be met. Comments on the former included uncertainty "whether or not I was doing a good job" (Respondent 2), and "whether my participation has met any objectives" (Respondent 12). Mentees, too, expressed some uncertainty; one suggesting that "more guidelines for the mentor program" (Respondent 17) would be beneficial.

The scheme had been set up to be as non-directive as possible at the pilot stage, not only because informal peer mentoring appears to achieve productive results (e.g. Foote & Solem, 2009), but also because the participants on both sides of the partnership were considered to be self-starting high achievers who had already achieved a degree of recognition within their own fields. An official training process for mentors was rejected out of fear that

the time requirement would dissuade potential mentors from participating in the program, in spite of the support in the literature for specific peer mentor training (e.g. Barrera et al., 2010; Colvin, 2007; Langer, 2010; McLoughlin et al., 2007). However, the evaluations indicated that a higher level of overt management would have provided mentors and mentees with a greater level of clarity on the purpose of the scheme and the role and responsibilities of participants. Future programs would therefore need to incorporate suggestions for change in this area, such as the inclusion of clearly-articulated overarching objectives, a language checklist for mentees, language resources for mentors, an orientation or training session for mentors and an informal function after the commencement of the process at which mentors could share experiences and raise issues or concerns.

Participants also put forward ideas for exploring ways of providing mentoring services beyond the traditional dyadic model. The SELMS had been organised as a one-on-one activity because it was believed that individual needs would demand attention to the individual and the opportunity to focus on specific topics as required. However, the suggestions which emerged from the survey tended to focus on the advantages of pooling resources. Three ways of doing this were identified:

- Rotating mentors among the mentees, so that "they can get other ideas and approaches to improve their English" (Respondent 3). A variation on this was a suggestion that mentees should have more than one mentor: "...such as an English specialist mentor to improve the common English ability and an academic mentor to help the technical English aspect" (Respondent 14).
- Having two mentees work simultaneously with one mentor, as "we could all learn from each other and it extends the mentees' networks even further" (Respondent 8).
- Having scheduled group sessions "…for some mentors and some mentees, so that they can get together, maybe 4-6 persons to discuss as a group" (Respondent 18), and opportunities for informal gatherings for mentors so that they could share their experiences and ideas.

Discussion

The difficulty inherent in many student-to-student or colleague-to-colleague programs, even when they adopt the nomenclature of

"peer", is that relationships are inevitably unequal where there is a knowledge or skills differential. EAL students, or in this case, staff, are particularly open to being identified as requiring "remedial" support (Hirsch, 2007; Watson, 1997), a term that carries with it a strong connotation of failure and "casts its shadow on students' abilities in other areas of the course" (Pantelides, 1999, p. 73). Establishing the mentoring scheme, therefore, ran the danger not only of repressing EAL staff's own sense of self-worth but also of reinforcing the sense of the "other" and the norms of the L1 speaker.

Recognising, too, that "the political, cultural, and social dimensions of . . . language teaching are embedded in each and every decision we make" (Hall & Eggington, 2001, p. 1), the final judgment on whether to proceed with the language development program of which the SELMS was part was only made following the consultation with potential participants through focus group research. The enthusiasm with which the proposal was met and content discussed in focus groups, the high number of requests to register for the program, and the information obtained through evaluations on the benefits gained all indicated that the EAL participants themselves did not share these qualms, but viewed the program as a professional development opportunity that would potentially enhance career prospects.

The reported impact of the experience on the mentors was, however, the most telling indicator of the value of the program. While some growth in cultural sensitivity among participants had been identified as a desirable and potential outcome, the transformational nature of the cultural learning experience that was reported had not been predicted. The strength of the responses suggests that peer mentoring as an indirect tool for the promotion of intercultural understanding deserves further exploration.

Educational institutions need "opportunities… for students to develop intercultural competence with an awareness of other cultures and perspectives" (Tudball, 2005, p. 23), given the increasingly globalised milieu in which we live. One component of, if not a prerequisite for, intercultural competence is the open discussion of cultural differences (Lo Bianco, 2004; Pegrum, 2008). The establishment of peer mentoring schemes in EAL/ESL classrooms and academic language and learning centres in the secondary and tertiary sector might be one way of stimulating intercultural awareness among L1 participants in an experiential and non-didactic environment.

Conclusion

The SELMS was one component of a program that had been introduced to address a particular need that had been identified at an institutional level and reinforced by EAL staff through focus group research. Those who responded to the evaluation survey were unanimously positive about the value of such a program, and those who expressed a preference strongly supported its continuation. While the numbers participating in the survey were small, the responses indicated that a more complex educational experience was taking place than had first been envisaged; the desired outcome that EAL mentees should believe that their English proficiency had increased did eventuate, according to responses received, but the strength of the response by mentors that they had gained a higher level of cultural awareness was not expected. It suggests that programs of this type deserve further investigation to explore whether they can incorporate not only the goal of increasing participants' English language levels but also attain other goals less immediately measureable, such as building intercultural sensitivity and developing closer relationships between diverse groups of peers.

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Katie Dunworth is Director, International in the School of Education at Curtin University. She has been involved in TESOL for over 25 years, as a teacher, academic administrator and researcher. Her research interests include tertiary language proficiency, internationalisation and language testing.

Correspondence: k.dunworth@curtin.edu.au
