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Abstract

Mentorship has been shown to enhance engagement, participation, and understanding of the workplace through the development of soft-skills and leadership capacity. This research identifies and describes the social representations of second and third year Baccalaureate accounting students relating to their experiences in mentoring first year accounting students. We used an exploratory research method based on a qualitative analysis of 34 semi-structured interviews. Our research intends to answer these questions: To what extent is a mandatory Student Peer Mentorship Project useful for second and third year Baccalaureate accounting students in developing their interpersonal and communication skills and leadership capacity?; and How can this experience be transferable to the workplace?

The main results show that the mentoring experience has provided Baccalaureate students' with the opportunity to develop their soft-skills, both interpersonal and communication skills, and has improved their leadership capacity. They took diverse actions to motivate their mentees to succeed, drawing on their own past experience of the school, program, courses, and their professors. They provided mentees with information on what to expect in the first semester in their courses as well as where, how, and when to study. These students mentioned that their intrinsic motivation, their personal satisfaction, and their leadership capacity had increased by helping and supporting their mentees. Also, they felt that they improved their communication skills through the ability to provide information and meet and support new accounting students. Finally, their experience seems as valuable for them as for their mentees and is transferable to the workplace.

Il a été démontré que le mentorat améliorait l'engagement, la participation et la compréhension dans le milieu de travail grâce au développement de compétences non techniques et de capacités d'encadrement. Cette recherche identifie et décrit les représentations sociales d'étudiants de deuxième et troisième année de premier cycle en comptabilité reliées à leur expérience d'avoir agi à titre de mentors pour des étudiants de première année en comptabilité. Nous avons utilisé une méthode de recherche exploratoire basée sur l'analyse qualitative de 34 interviews semi-structurées. Notre recherche a pour but de répondre aux questions suivantes : 1) dans quelle mesure un projet de mentorat par les pairs obligatoire serait-il utile aux étudiants de deuxième et troisième année de premier cycle en comptabilité et les aiderait à développer leurs compétences interpersonnelles et en communication, ainsi que leurs capacités d'encadrement? et 2) comment cette expérience peut-elle être transférable au milieu de travail?

Les résultats principaux indiquent que l'expérience de mentorat a donné aux étudiants qui ont agi à titre de mentors l'occasion de développer leurs compétences non techniques ainsi que leurs compétences interpersonnelles et en communication, et qu'elle leur a permis d'améliorer leurs capacités d'encadrement. Ces étudiants ont agi de diverses manières pour motiver leurs mentorés à réussir, en puisant dans leur propre expérience passée de l'école, du programme, des cours et de leurs professeurs. Ils ont fourni aux mentorés des renseignements sur ce à quoi ceux-ci devaient s'attendre lors du premier semestre de leurs études et leur ont indiqué quoi, comment et quand étudier. Ces étudiants ont mentionné que leur motivation intrinsèque, leur satisfaction personnelle et leurs capacités d'encadrement avaient augmenté quand ils ont aidé et soutenu leurs mentorés. Ils ont également indiqué qu'ils pensaient avoir amélioré leurs compétences en communication grâce au fait qu'ils avaient été en mesure de donner les renseignements appropriés aux nouveaux étudiants en comptabilité, de répondre à leurs besoins et de les soutenir. Pour finir, leur expérience semble avoir autant de valeur pour eux que pour leurs mentorés et elle est transférable au milieu de travail.

Keywords

baccalaureate degree in accounting, mentorship, soft-skills, leadership

Mentorship and mentor/mentee relationships have consistently been shown to enhance engagement, participation, and understanding of the workplace (Allen, Finkelstein, & Poteet, 2009). From our experience as professors in a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) accounting program, we believe that students enrolled in an undergraduate accounting degree need to develop their soft-skills, including interpersonal and communication skills, and their leadership capacity in order to succeed in post-secondary education and the workplace. Experts broadly define soft-skills as a set of non-technical, professional abilities such as communication, interpersonal, and customer service skills (sometimes referred to as “people skills”), including emotional intelligence, as well as personal traits such as integrity and responsibility that employees need to secure employment and succeed in the workplace (Rao, 2012; Robles, 2012). While some readers may consider the terminology of “soft-skills” inadequate or obsolete, as professors and business educators, who are educating accounting students, we have observed there is often an unspoken delineation or understanding of “hard-skills” and “soft-skills” in this context.

As well, as professors engaged in the learning process of our students, we have noticed that a significant number of first year, first semester students are overwhelmed by the academic process. A peer mentorship program represents an important support for their learning. By explaining and sharing these new experiences, student mentors in later semesters can help demystify the first semester and thereby facilitate success in the new students’ program and positively impact their academic performance. We believe bringing a mandatory Student Peer Mentorship Project into our BBA accounting program will simulate the workplace and therefore serve to increase the senior learners’ professional skills and career readiness. Furthermore, we want to add our scholarly voices to the ongoing discourse of mentorship in Canadian post-secondary institutions and Canadian workplaces.

There is a significant body of research on mentoring, in particular peer mentoring in higher education settings. We have not identified, however, any specific studies in a Canadian context that have investigated how a mandatory Student Peer Mentorship program integrated into a Baccalaureate degree program can enhance the professional skills of student mentors as well as how the student mentors perceive their overall experiences of the program. We did note the findings of Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, and Wilss (2008) who explored the perspective of student mentors and the social dimensions of their experience in a post-secondary technology college in Australia. The authors identified the gap in research that explores how mentors perceive their mentoring experience in a higher education setting.

Our qualitative research sheds light on current student mentors’ best practices, and it also informs other professors who are seeking to understand the potential of this type of program and how their students’ professional skills and career readiness might be improved through involvement in a peer mentor/mentee relationship. This research identifies and describes the social representations of second- and third-year Baccalaureate accounting students relating to their experiences in mentoring first year, first semester students in the same program. This research is limited to an analysis of the mentor role; we did not undertake analysis on the mentee role at this time. We used this exploratory research method that was carried out on-site at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in the School of Business.

The results presuppose the presence of central elements (shared) in a social representation, as is postulated in our research question. The conceptual framework of this research is rooted in the theory of social representations (Abric, 1984, 1987) and the concept of mentoring. The social representation theory makes it possible to shed light on the central trends

of current student practices and on the conditions and constraints related to this type of program and its transferability into the workplace. The Student Peer Mentorship Project precisely calls for the exploration of the mentoring concept to identify and describe the mentor-mentee relationship and the types of actions that mentors are using in order to motivate their mentee and to develop their own soft-skills and leadership capacity.

Our research intends to answer two questions: (a) To what extent is a mandatory Student Peer Mentorship Project useful for second- and third-year Baccalaureate accounting students in developing their interpersonal and communication skills and leadership capacity?; and (b) How can this experience be transferable to the workplace?

This research explores the general results from qualitative data analysis related to the following four specific objectives and are directly linked to emergent themes in course content and activities of our organizational behaviour course:

1. to describe the social representations of student mentors related to the types of actions they used to motivate their first year mentee;
2. to identify the social representations of student mentors related to their overall experience and how it can help them improve their interpersonal and communication skills;
3. to identify the social representations of student mentors relating to their overall experience and how it can help them improve their leadership capacity; and
4. to describe the social representations of student mentors related to how they will transfer this experience into their future workplace.

Literature Review

We concur with the understanding of Cunningham and Hillier (2013) who described mentoring as informal learning that focusses on “communicating clearly and in building positive connections” (p. 48). This literature review situates our research work amidst a significant array of material on peer mentoring in higher education. Initially, we investigated material from North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia in higher education, health care, K-12 education, and business in order to confirm our understanding that the practice of mentoring provides positive outcomes for the organization and the participants in both mentor and mentee (also termed protégé) roles (Allen, Eby, O’Brien, & Lentz, 2007; Bakhshi, Harrington, & O’Neill, 2008; Dennison, 2000; Dzikowski, 2013; Eby & Lockwood, 2004; Godshalk & Sosik, 2002; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Leck & Robitaille, 2011; Parise & Forret, 2008; Rutti, Helms, & Rose, 2012; Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchase, 2006). As well, our literature review considered the broader concept of mentorship in workplace settings specifically related to the development of soft-skills: communication and interpersonal skills and leadership capacity and their desirability in the workplace. These soft-skills were identified as role modeling, coaching, tutoring, and as resources for information (Buffalo State, 2014), and “human skills,” including social, interpersonal, and leadership skills (Katz, 1974). More specifically, Beard, Schwieger, and Surendran (2008) discussed the necessity of incorporating competency in soft-skills into curricula and Gallivan, Truex, and Kvasny (2004) (as cited in Beard et al.) identified the three non-technical skills sought by employers as communication, interpersonal, and leadership. Thacker and Yost (2002) noted employers are looking for newly graduated business students with strong communication and leadership skills. Hansen and Hansen (2014) also commented

that soft-skills were “critical employability skills” (para. 4), with communication skills being the most significant characteristic mentioned by potential employers. As well, they considered interpersonal abilities and relationship building capacity as important, as well as leadership, including the ability to motivate and coach others. Mentoring is considered an essential leadership skill (MindTools, 2013), and Dearborn (2013) developed a framework for highly effective mentors in the corporate sector that includes these skills. Of particular significance to our research work was the linkages between mentoring and the development of empathy (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Kram & Isabella, 1985) and mentoring and the increase of trust-building amongst the participants (Leck & Robitaille, 2011). Eby and Lockwood (2004) considered the concept of formal mentoring and named specific benefits of the experience, including personal satisfaction resulting from building relationships, as well as enhancement of managerial skills. More recent research explored the professional contributions mentors were able to make to the workplace as a result of these relationships (Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Ghosh, Reio, & Haynes, 2012; LaFleur & White, 2010). Direct linkages between mentorship and leadership in the workplace were outlined by Dziczkowski (2013) who argued that mentors benefit from improved self-esteem and increased professional skills including “coaching, communication, and reflecting” (p. 357).

Significant to our research was literature on mentoring in higher education settings. Many higher education organizations worldwide are developing peer mentoring relationships. A broad diversity of models for mentoring in these settings has been studied and the benefits of mentoring are confirmed by many authors (Allen, Russell, & Maetzke, 1997; Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Dawson, 2014; Fleck & Mullins, 2012; Fox & Stevenson, 2004; Goff, 2011; Hall, & Jaugietis, 2011; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Holt & Berwise, 2012; Horowitz & Christopher, 2012; Hryciw, Tangalakis, Supple, & Best, 2013; Lynn, 2010; Reddick, Griffin, Cherwitc, Cerda-Prazak, & Bunch, 2012; Reyes, 2012; T. Smith, 2008; D. Smith, 2013). Of particular interest is the concept of competency-based approaches and mentoring that was explored by March and Bishop (2014), who affirmed that just as the usage of competency models increases in business organizations, so too do higher education organizations’ need to develop ways to prepare students for professional success in the workplace. They described “communicator” and “relationship-builder” as key components of these models for increased competency.

The role of mentor has been of particular interest in research regarding peer mentoring in higher education settings. The enhancement of career readiness, receptiveness and suitability for training, and career success as young professionals gained from this specific role has been noted (BLS, 2014). More specifically, Smith (2008) documented opportunities for the development of communication and interpersonal skills for peer mentors undertaken during a full semester course. Laughlin and Moore (2012) considered mentoring and its connection to leadership in an American First Nations educational setting. In this study, mentoring was depicted as a profound exploration of the mentors’ capacity for connection and individual growth. A study by Fox and Stephenson (2004) in the U.K. indicated benefits for peer mentors as a result of their participation in an accounting program under investigation; mentors revealed they had more appreciation for “their own strengths” (p. 199), and that both their confidence and range of social relationships had increased.

As noted above, Heirdsfield et al. (2008) focused on the mentors’ experiences in a first year university program in the School of Early Childhood at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia. The mentors’ perspective was investigated, and, in particular, the

benefits of mentoring point to the importance of the social dimension of the experience. Overall, it was a significant learning opportunity. These authors noted there has been a gap in research prior to that date exploring how student mentors perceive their peer mentoring experience.

Colvin and Ashman (2010) developed the themes of the peer mentor relationships and types of mentor roles in their study conducted in a large public university in the western United States. As well, Fox, Stevenson, Connelly, Duff, and Dunlop (2010) discussed an increase in success measurements in academic performance as a result of mentorship programs, which, from our perspective, supports the building of continuing confidence and workplace readiness amongst peer mentors in similar higher education settings and provided further rationale for our investigation. Goff (2011) considered peer mentors at an Ontario university and noted they were “encouraged to practice their leadership...and facilitating skills” (p. 3) as an integral part of the support of new students. Hall and Jaugietis (2011) commented that peer mentoring programs in university settings in Sydney, Australia have in fact been widely adopted in an effort to provide a positive experience for new students. The impacts on the mentors in this research setting were significant, as it was concluded “that their communication, social, employment and organizational skills, and self-confidence had been enhanced” (p. 48).

Jones and Kolko (2002) found that growth and development of peer mentors in a higher education setting in Phoenix, Arizona was clearly apparent. Communication skills, study habits, relationships, self-confidence, and self-motivation to reach goals had all been enhanced as a result of the mentors’ experiences. This study noted progression in “maturity, moral thinking, and personal integrity” (p. 12). Willis, Bland, Manka, and Craft (2012) investigated peer mentoring in an educational setting and confirmed social skills were developed through positive mentoring experiences. Further to the concept of leadership capacity enhancement for mentors in higher education settings, Campbell et al. (2012) supported mentoring as a key influence on leadership development in American college settings, with an emphasis on the development of leadership skills amongst the protégés in the relationship. In a study by Harris (2013), data on students’ perceptions of mentoring relationships in a higher education setting clustered into the general categories of “personal support, professional development, and role modelling” (p. 87). Shojai, Davis, and Root (2014) confirmed the use of mentoring as a developmental relationship that supports academic performance while in school.

Although our research focusses on the mentor role in the peer mentorship relationship, we surveyed research on mentoring in higher education, in both undergraduate and graduate settings, that also focused on the mentees’ or protégés’ experiences regarding motivation, retention, and anxiety levels (Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2012), as well as their academic success, program retention, organizational goal attainment, and competitive advantage (Allen et al., 1997; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003; Smith, 2008). Clearly, peer mentoring experiences are significant to identify the importance of support for the participants in both roles. Furthermore, peer mentoring in an Austrian university setting confirmed mentoring as an effective way to foster relationships for in-coming students (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schabmann, Spiel, & Carbon, 2011). Mentoring programs in higher education settings provided as assistance for new students adjusting to the environment were described by Fleck and Mullins (2012) related to graduate school and the emphasis is on protégé success. The findings indicated that psychosocial assistance and networking help are key for these protégé participants.

In summary, the evidence of the significance of mentorship in workplace settings, the benefits of mentoring for both mentors and mentees, and the importance of support for mentees’ experiences is abundant. We were able to confirm that research on peer mentoring in higher

education settings situated our research and confirmed the experience for mentors and mentees was significant and supportive for both roles. We also validated our understanding of mentoring as an opportunity for the development of soft-skills, in particular communication skills and leadership capacity. This literature review provides strong support for the importance of higher education programs offering peer mentorship and its direct relevance to success in the workplace. It also indicates the lack of a specific Canadian study focusing on the social representations of how a mandatory Student Peer Mentorship program integrated into a Baccalaureate accounting degree program can enhance the professional skills of student mentors as well as their overall experiences of the program.

Method

Context

We have conducted this investigation by gathering data through the use of semi-structured interviews in order to gain in-depth information from our target population. Approximately 82 second- and third-year BBA accounting students participated in a Student Peer Mentorship Project during the Fall 2013 term as an assessed component of their course work with the two researchers. The course is an overview of organizational behaviour and includes a discussion on mentorship in the workplace as a dimension of leadership. The assessed assignment was a reflective write-up on their experiences as a student mentor for first year, first semester students covering the themes of personality, motivation, leadership, and reflection on the experience. As mentioned previously, the four selected themes are directly linked to emergent themes in course content and activities of our organizational behaviour course.

These students were randomly paired to mentor students in the first semester of the program. The guidelines they were provided outlined their role as peer mentor, including to assist a first-year student in orienting and adapting to the environment including support services on campus, best places to eat or study, library services, tutoring services, life as a second- or third-year student, or discussions about career aspirations. They were advised that the mentor would need to be reliable, trustworthy, helpful, and well-informed about the campus. As well, we suggested that their listening skills and personal communication skills – empathy, paraphrasing, open ended questions, clarifying, encouraging, and supporting – may improve over the course of this activity. It was made explicit that their role was not one of academic advisor, counselor, or tutor. We acknowledged their role as a peer mentor would be significant as a representative of the SAIT BBA program as a second- or third-year student and act as a guide, role model, information provider, and coach, with the possibility of developing a lasting friendship with their mentee. We noted this activity would enhance their personal growth and interpersonal skill development, and therefore assist them in their future careers. Finally, they were advised that as a Student Mentor, confidentiality was important, and mentor-mentee discussions should remain confidential.

The student peer mentors were to first conduct three meetings with the mentee assigned to them (20-30 minutes minimum). These meetings would be face-to-face in a public location at a time that worked for both of the parties, or they could meet via skype, Facetime, or by telephone. The mentors were to take meeting notes in a designated journal, and the mentee and mentor would each sign a copy of these notes at the end of each meeting or prior to submission with the assignment. They were advised to notify the instructor if there were any difficulties

setting meetings or working with the assigned mentee, and finally, work through the written assignment and submit as per the required submission date.

The actual written assignment guidelines are outlined with the following steps, four themes and eight questions to ask their mentees:

Step 1: Research

- Research mentoring and peer mentoring in business and education. Find three articles that interest you and provide a brief summary of each.

Step 2: Personality

- Question 1: Discuss your personality type and that of your mentee. Would this “match” work well in a formal mentoring setting? Why or why not? Explain by giving specific examples.

Step 3: Motivation

- Question 2: What concrete actions did you take to motivate this student to succeed in the first semester? Explain by giving specific examples.
- Question 3: Which key rewards increased your intrinsic motivation to mentor this student and why? Explain by giving specific examples.

Step 4: Leadership

- Question 4: How can a mentoring experience contribute to the development of your leadership capacity? Explain by giving specific examples.

Step 5: Reflection

- Question 5: What were some of the questions you were asked? Give specific examples.
- Question 6: What type of information did you supply? Explain by giving specific examples.
- Question 7: Do you think this was a valuable experience for the student you mentored? Explain.
- Question 8: Was this a valuable experience for you? Explain using specific examples.

Data Collection

Formal approval was received from the Research Ethics Board of SAIT to undertake this research. After this was received, and after the assessed material was marked and returned to students, we began to talk informally to our students in class regarding their possible participation in the research project. We sought potential interest through a show of hands, and asked potential participants to provide us with their telephone contact. We notified them of our intention to follow up with a telephone call for clarification and information purposes at a later date.

After the course was completed, we emailed all students from the second- and third- year BBA accounting program who were enrolled in the course in Fall 2013 to formally advise them about this research initiative. At that time, we invited them to participate and asked them to

respond by email with a show of interest. In this email, we stated that participation in the research would be voluntary. As well, through their response email, they would be able to self-identify as potential participants.

Next, we emailed the students who had expressed interest in participating in the research a copy of a Letter of Consent informing them of the details of our research. This initial email request for participation in our research was sent to these students in January and February 2014. After their initial expression of interest, and confirmation of their availability, a total of 34 respondents were interviewed, representing a participation rate of 41% of our total population. The students were not identified by name, only by code number, in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. These interviews were conducted at SAIT in the School of Business in February and March 2014.

In order to cover all dimensions of the discourses, the interview guide was divided into four themes: “personality,” “motivation,” “leadership,” and “reflection” and contained eight stable questions underlying our research objectives that identify the central core and the peripheral elements of a representation (Abric, 1984, 1987). The questions were the same as in their written assignment, and participants were interviewed in the same way to ensure consistency. The goal was to obtain information on themes previously established, more particularly on the different elements related to our conceptual framework, the social representations. Social representations are a kind of knowledge which is socially constructed and shared, with a practical purpose and which contributes to building a reality that is common amongst the members of a social group (Jodelet, 1989).

The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded. Although we were aware of the bias the recording device can create in suggesting to students to only say things in a socially acceptable way, we felt that recording remains crucial to capture the discourses in their entirety. The interviews were then transcribed word-for-word by an external transcriber who was not involved in the course, program, or in the interview process.

The semi-structured interviews compose the main material of this research, as we consider that they reflect a “discourse in action” regarding the usefulness of this project and the development of the peer mentors’ soft-skills and their transferability to the workplace.

Data Analysis

A summary of the results from the lexicometrical analysis of these 34 respondents’ semi-structured interviews provides data for the analysis. The discourse of the student mentors is also detailed to underline the impact of this experience on the mentoring students’ soft-skills and leadership capacity, and the transferability of these attributes to the workplace. The experience of the student mentees is not included, rather the focus is on the experience of the student mentors. More particularly, the focus is on the social representations of second and third year Baccalaureate accounting students as we wanted to understand their experiences in mentoring first year, first semester students from the same program.

We performed a lexicometrical analysis on the qualitative (textual) data obtained from the transcriptions of these 34 semi-structured interviews. We were then able to identify the cognitive and conative components of the central core and peripheral structures of a social representation.

In practice, the fundamental principle behind using factor models in textual statistics is straightforward discourse, as a common object and as it refers to a contextualized vocabulary,

implies the presence of stable concepts represented by the use of recurrent and shared lexicometrical (words) and syntactic (phrases) structures. These words and phrases correspond in theory to a Bayesian distribution (Becue-Bertaud & Lebart, 2002). Words and phrases form the foundation of social groups with reference to their discourse surrounding the areas where the axes meet in a factorial design. These meetings or clusters are also called barycenters. These discursive elements make up the shared content of a concept or symbolic object.

We have used a lexicometrical analysis because it makes it easier to identify the position of significant indicators in the discourse because the software allows the user to move between the factorial design, the words or phrases, and their contextualization (Grenon, 2000, 2008; Roy, 2011). When this analysis is performed on relatively dense bodies of texts resulting from a small number of participants, as is the case with the verbatim transcripts of the interviews conducted with the students who participated in our research, “variation factors in relation to the barycenter generally correspond to a polar distinction at the level of individual variation sources regarding specific discourse components belonging to a small number of individuals” (Larose, Bourque, & Freiman, 2010, p. 2).

In this context, the focus of the lexicometrical analysis is to find what is common to the whole corpus, or body of data. The vocabulary is listed according to the frequency used and can be analysed from the general profile of the corpus. It allows the researcher to border the lexicometrical universe of the corpus and to identify the most frequent words shared by the whole corpus. The elements retained the stems from recurrent words and word segments that were stable and most frequently used by our student mentors during the interviews as determined by the lexicometrical analysis of each of the eight questions. This type of analysis allowed us to identify similarities in all questions and the results are presented in this section by question. Therefore, we discovered if the words are interconnected, how they related to each question, and what they said. While the graphical lexicometrical results are not included here, the summarized results of the lexicometrical analysis are represented in the results section.

Results

The summarized results from this qualitative data analysis enabled us to draw conclusions pertaining to our eight research questions under four specific themes:

Theme 1: Personality

Q1: Discuss your personality type and that of your mentee. Would this “match” work well in a formal mentoring setting? Why or why not? Explain by giving specific examples.

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: introvert, extrovert, match, and mentoring. Our results showed that a large portion of our participants qualified themselves as introverted (44%) and a smaller portion as extroverted (23.5%). Furthermore, they qualified their mentee as introverted (35%) or as extroverted (32%). The results also showed that a large number of our participants thought that the personality match would work in a formal mentoring setting (44%). However, with these results, we cannot assume that the rest of the participants who did not mention these two words, “match” and “mentoring” (54%), did not have a good experience and that their personalities would or would not be compatible in a formal setting.

Theme 2: Motivation

Q2: What concrete actions did you take to motivate this student to succeed in the first semester? Explain by giving specific examples.

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: experience, hard, and motivate. Our results showed that mentors' discourse was highly diverse, and that they had taken different actions to motivate their mentees to succeed in the first semester and first year. Their discourse focused on giving personal experiences (24%), telling mentees about the difficulty level of the first semester and the first year (21%), recommending to their mentees that they take part in extracurricular activities (21%), and ask for help if needed (21%).

Q3: Which key rewards increased your intrinsic motivation to mentor this student and why? Explain by giving specific examples.

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: help, good, and satisfaction. Our results showed that a large majority of our participants had increased their intrinsic motivation to mentor a first year student (82%). The key intrinsic rewards that they mentioned were mainly focused on feeling able to help their mentee (58.8%), feeling good about helping someone (27%), and feeling personal satisfaction by mentoring a student (26%).

Theme 3: Leadership

Q4: How can a mentoring experience contribute to the development of your leadership capacity? Explain by giving specific examples.

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: leadership, skills, and help. The words "leadership" and "skills" were mentioned by the same exact participants, and our results showed that a large number of the mentors felt that this mentoring experience had developed their leadership skills (47%), had helped them become better leaders (21%), and had allowed them to help someone else to succeed (21%).

Theme 4: Reflection

Q5: What were some of the questions you were asked? Give specific examples.

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: class, course, and study. Our results showed that mentors' discourse was highly diverse and that mentees asked general information questions to their mentors related to what classes to take (29%), the easier courses (24%), the hardest classes (21%), how to study (21%), and where to study (18%).

Q6: What type of information did you supply? Explain by giving specific examples.

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: professor, class, and study. Our results showed that the main information provided by the mentors from the mentees focused on which class to take (38%), which professor to choose (32%), how to ask their professors for help (20%), and how to study (21%).

Q7: Do you think this was a valuable experience for the student you mentored? Explain. Was this a valuable experience for you? Explain using specific examples.

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: yes, experience, info, and valuable. Our results showed that the majority of our participants thought this mentoring project was a valuable experience for their mentees (59%), while much fewer of them (15%) thought this was not a good experience for the mentee (but they did not provide a specific explanation). Moreover, some of the mentors (38%) perceived their mentees' experience to be positive due to the type of information that they provided.

Question 8: Do you think this was a valuable experience for you? Yes/No and Why?

The most frequently repeated words shared by the whole corpus for this question were: yes, good, and experience. Our results showed that almost all of our participants (91%) thought that this mentoring project was a valuable experience for them for diverse reasons: to increase their leadership skills (19%), to improve their communication skills (19%), to provide information (19%), and to meet a new student and people (16%).

Discussion

The results from this qualitative data analysis enabled us to draw conclusions pertaining to what extent this mandatory Student Peer Mentorship Project was useful for developing the student mentors' soft-skills, specifically interpersonal and communication skills, and leadership capacity, and as well, how this experience can simulate the workplace and therefore serve to increase the learners' professional skills and career readiness. In addition, the results presupposed the presence of central elements (shared) in a social representation, as was postulated in our research question, related to four specific objectives. The results of our research specifically linked to qualitative data analysis led to observations on their mentoring experience.

The first objective of our research was to describe the social representations of student mentors related to the types of actions they used to motivate their first year mentee. The results of the qualitative data analysis of participant responses indicates that all of our participants took actions that were perceived to motivate their mentees to succeed in the first semester and first year. These actions are diverse but generally, all are in support of the success of their mentees, and specifically relate to the students mentors' own past experience of the school, the program, the courses, and their professors.

The peer mentors typically provided general information related to courses, classes, the institution, what to expect in the first semester, as well as specific information about how to study, and where to study. The sharing of this informal yet significant material between the mentors and their mentees indicated to the researchers a level of understanding and desire to

support and build relationships with these students. The student mentors were prepared and willing to share their 'secrets to success' and the material conveyed a tone of kindness and thoughtfulness throughout. These findings are consistent with the themes of empathy and trust-building found in mentor-protégé relationships discussed in early work by Kram and Isabella (1985) and later by Allen, Poteet, and Burroughs (1997), Eby and Lockwood (2004), and Leck and Robitaille (2011). As well, our findings support the discussions relating to the benefits to both peer mentors and protégés from relationship-building and connections that result from the experience (Fleck & Mullins, 2012; Leidenfrost et al., 2011; Willis et al., 2012). The interpersonal growth and connectedness is also discussed by Laughlin and Moore (2012).

Clearly, the intention of the peer mentors in our study was to enhance the mentees' experience and build positive relationships with them. The findings indicate the mentors' experiences and knowledge of the institution have a direct impact on the mentees' understanding of the institution and how the institutional and academic structure can support their academic needs. We believe the student mentors exhibited intentional motivational strategies to support the success of their mentees through both support in relationship-building and in helping them to deepen their understanding and navigation of the institution. These strategies are deeply interconnected as a means to academic success for the mentees.

The second objective of our research was to identify the social representations of student mentors related to their overall experience, and how these representations can help mentors improve their interpersonal and communication skills. The results of the qualitative data analysis of participant responses indicated almost all of our participants thought this mentoring project was a valuable experience for them; a majority of them thought the mentoring project was also a valuable experience for their mentee. The student peer mentors seemed to believe that their intrinsic motivation and personal satisfaction had increased through their realization of their ability to help and support their mentees. In terms of their own skills, a majority of the participants believed, as evidenced in the discourse, their leadership skills had developed as a result of the experience. This concept of leadership capacity was directly linked to their perception of an improvement in communication skills through the ability to provide information, and meet and support new people. The increase in communication skills and leadership skills were found to be deeply linked in the data analysis.

These findings are supported in the literature, specifically by Thacker and Yost (2002) who discussed the need for effective communication, particularly in workplace teams, and Eby and Lockwood (2004) who found that personal satisfaction resulted from building relationships as well as enhancing managerial skills. As well, Hall and Jaugietis (2011) found that communication, social, employment and organizational skills, and self-confidence had been enhanced through peer mentoring in a higher education setting.

The third objective of our research was to identify the social representations of student mentors relating to their overall experience and how it can help them improve their leadership capacity. The results of the qualitative data analysis of participant responses revealed that many of the mentors believed they had directly developed their leadership skills, while others acknowledged some impact on their development of leadership capacity. It is apparent that leadership capacity was being built, but in this research, the concept of leadership was not addressed as a concept separate from the skills of communication, relationship-building, and support of others.

These findings are supported by the 2004 research of Gallivan et al. (as cited in Beard et al., 2008), in which the ability to work with others and communicate ideas is directly related to

and cannot be separated from good team leadership skills. The linkages with leadership capacity and mentorship are obvious, as confirmed by Cunningham and Hillier (2013), Dzikowski (2013), Eby and Lockwood (2004), and Goff (2011).

The fourth objective of our research was to describe the social representations of student mentors related to how they will transfer this experience into their future workplace. The results of the qualitative data analysis of participant responses focused on the participant student mentors and the match between the personalities of the participants as relevant to how they will transfer this experience to their future workplace. Many described themselves as introverts matched with both extroverts and introverts, and a large number of mentors indicated that these matches would work in a workplace setting. However, many did not have experience of the workplace, and the data results do not enable us to draw significant conclusions about personality matches related to workplace success.

The literature indicates the desirability of soft-skills, in particular communication skills, interpersonal abilities, and relationship building skills, are key to the success of the student in their future employability (Hansen & Hansen, 2014). This is supported by the findings of Beard et al. (2008) who discussed the necessity of incorporating competency in soft-skills into the curriculum, in particular, the three non-technical skills sought by employers as communication, interpersonal skills, and leadership, noting that employers are looking for newly graduated business students with strong communication and leadership skills. While Shojai et al. (2014) commented these relationships support academic performance, March and Bishop (2014) affirmed the importance of preparing students for professional success in the workplace and this preparation would include communication and relationship building.

Limitations

In terms of limitations of this research, as professors and researchers, we were aware of potential bias involved in an assessed assignment; therefore, we recruited our participants after these assessments were completed and marked and the course was concluded. While this research is informed by this term project, it remained separate from any and all assessed material. Participation was strictly voluntary, thereby removing any significant potential bias. To avoid undue influence, the two professors did not interview the students whom they had taught in the former semester. We purposefully interviewed students whom we had not taught. Since the potential research subjects volunteered to take part in the research, there is likely to be a degree of self-selection bias. For example, the decision to participate in the study may reflect some inherent bias in the characteristics/traits of the participants. This can either lead to the sample not being representative of the population being studied, or exaggerating some particular finding from the study. The potential impact of self-selection biases, however, are overshadowed by the much larger potential impact of mandating students to participate in a study that may be perceived to be linked to their course evaluation. Furthermore, as this is exploratory research, the intention is to explore questions in an effort to lay the initial groundwork for future research rather than focus on minor bias of the participants' discourse.

Conclusions

This research has identified and described the social representations of third and fourth semester Baccalaureate accounting students relating to their experiences in mentoring first year,

first semester students in the same program, the impact of this experience on the mentoring students' soft-skills and leadership capacity, and the transferability of these attributes into the workplace. Through the process of lexicometrical analysis, we have gained evidence from the discourse of our student participants to indicate that the experience of mentoring has provided them with the opportunity to develop their soft-skills, both interpersonal and communication skills, and has enhanced their leadership capacity.

As professors in a BBA accounting program, we believe the mandatory Student Peer Mentorship Project will simulate the workplace and therefore serve to increase the learners' professional skills and career readiness. The development of essential skills such as interpersonal and communication skills that will support leadership effectiveness is essential in diverse workplace environments and will continue to increase in importance.

We noticed a significant number of first year, first semester students are overwhelmed by the academic process and do not know where to start to reach out for support. A peer mentorship program represents a significant option for them. By explaining and sharing these new experiences, student mentors in later semesters can help de-mystify the first semester and facilitate the new students' introduction into their program. This type of support will directly impact academic and social success in the program. The mentoring project is a tremendous opportunity for a senior student to guide a new student on how to succeed academically that can include, as our results show, everything from encouraging good study skills to effectively planning their schedules. Additionally, mentoring a new student represents a unique opportunity to improve the student mentors' professional skills and career readiness.

Consequently, any postsecondary institution can enhance its undergraduate curriculum by creating and integrating a formal Student Peer Mentorship Program to support new and continuing students with their social and academic transition during their first year of their program. A peer mentorship program can be developed as a formal mentorship program in a casual environment. This type of program is directly aimed at enriching social culture and developing social connectedness, encouraging student interactions, and facilitating a positive learning community based on support, camaraderie, and engagement. Furthermore, the literature review shows that a Student Peer Mentorship Program is also known to facilitate personal and professional growth by enhancing the participants' social skills, leadership capacity, and can positively impact their academic performance.

Finally, this research adds another dimension to the ongoing discourse of mentorship and engagement in Canadian post-secondary institutions and Canadian workplaces. In this research we focused only on the social representations of the student mentors; we believe there is further research to do relating to social representations of the mentees' experiences. As well, we see the benefits of longitudinal analysis that further explores the relationship of these skills to workplace settings and informs the work of professors who are considering these types of programs in their teaching practice. We see a significant benefit of conducting further exploration of the best practices of faculty working with student peer mentors and mentees to ensure that all parties are supported in their experiences.

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