Peer Mentors in Undergraduates' Research Proposal Writing in Taiwan

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Abstract: To date, there has been little research in the existing literature exploring how peer mentors can assist college students' research proposal. This paper provides the background to the adoption of a peer mentoring program in a research writing class in Taiwan. The purpose of this study is to investigate the value of using peer mentors to assist college students' research proposal writing. This paper provides a background to the reason for implementing peer mentors as a teaching and learning practice in a research class. The final section of the paper explores the effectiveness and advantages of peer mentoring with a focus on challenges and rewarding experiences of peer mentors and mentees.

Keywords: Peer mentor, mentoring, research writing

Introduction

Many college students are required to take a research writing class or complete a graduation project prior graduation in Taiwan. However, not all college students are ready to undertake or conduct a research study. After all, research is what college students think graduate students or professors do to survive. Besides, in the past few decades, research writing classes are usually oversized. A research writing teacher could have 40 or even 50 students in class. Thus, the teaching and grading loads for instructors are overwhelming.

The present researcher has directed nearly 80 undergraduate proposals in the past 3 years. Throughout this process, the researcher found that students make the same mistakes. Thus, she ends up marking the same mistakes in student proposals again and again. Further, before she applied peer mentors in her class, she spent a great deal of time answering students' questions on their assignments and helping them correct their mistakes. The researcher (the research writing class instructor) is keen to help students, yet with the limited time she has in class and outside class, she has to think of a practical strategy to assist her teaching and students' learning. Then, that is how peer mentoring came along.

Review of the Literature

Origins of Mentoring

Mentoring originated from Greek mythology. In Homer's Greek epic poem, Mentor was King, Odysseus of Ithaca's companion. Mentor was instructed to stay in Ithaca during the Trojan Wars to raise the king's son, Telemachus. Then, Mentor was asked to serve as

father figure, teacher, role model, counselor, advisor, challenger, and encourager to help prepare Telemacus to be the future king (Carruthers, 1993).

Peer Mentoring Around the World

According to the origins of mentoring, mentoring has been practiced and has existed for many years. Peer mentoring programs are all over the world. It is true that not everyone is qualified to be a mentor. However, many peer mentors do go through a rigorous recruitment process. For examples, Jackling & Mcdowall (2008) reported on a peer mentoring program in an accounting setting in Australia. Candidates who want to apply for the mentor's position must be third year accounting students who have obtained a credit or above in the second year accounting unit involving the computer laboratory sessions. Then, mentors are selected according to academic performance, the quality of the written application and availability to participate for four weeks of the semester according to the scheduled class timetable. Smith (2008) implemented peer mentors into seven liberal arts courses at the University of Calgary in Canada. Peer mentors in the study must be in or beyond their third year of study. Further, they all enroll in the Collaborative Learning and Peer Mentoring, a semester-long and three credit course. In this course, potential peer mentors learn the theoretical and practical understanding of mentorship, peer assistance, and collaborative learning in the context of higher education.

Similarly, another study in Australia done by Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss (2008) looked into peer mentoring program for first year undergraduate students from the mentors' perspective. To be selected as mentors in their study, candidates are required to have a Grade Point Average of at least 5.0 on a 7 point scale and accessibility to campus for ease in meeting with mentees. McLean (2004) studied if curriculum matters in peer mentoring at Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine in South Africa. The results revealed that curriculum did matter. For mentors to provide sound advice, mentors and mentee must share the same experience. It is interesting to note that there is a program called Northern Colorado Upward Bound or NCUB which is offered by the University of Northern Colorado, USA. The program offered a regional science-math enrichment and students get paid to attend ($40 per month during the academic year and $60 monthly in summer). However, students will not receive the full amount if they miss class time (Casey, 2009).

Implement the Peer Mentoring Program in a Research Writing Class

Bolender (1994) examined the effects of academic peer mentors on the grade-point averages of underprepared freshmen at a church-related coeducational college of arts and sciences at Mount Vernon Nazarene College in Ohio, USA. The present researcher has a similar peer mentoring design idea as Bolender (1994)'s which includes peer mentors' recruitment, screening, matching, training and peer mentor/mentee interactions.

Peer Mentor Recruitment and Screening

The present researcher did not have a rigorous recruitment process for recruiting the peer mentors in assisting college students' research proposal writing. In fact, students who enrolled in the present researcher's research writing class were all potential peer mentor candidates. The present researcher didn't have an application form for potential peer mentors to fill out nor a personal interview with him or her. Instead, all peer mentors were screened from the assignments they turned in. Basically, the present researcher lecture and gave students time to practice what she taught in class prior assigning a research writing task in the class. At this stage, no peer mentors assisted students' proposal writing because students' had not turned in any assignments to the present researcher (the instructor). If students could not understand or were confused about the lecture or assignment practice, they would have to ask the instructor in class.

Peer Mentor and Mentee Matching

When students turned in their assignments, the researcher started her peer mentors screening process. First, the researcher put students' assignment into 3 different piles. One pile is for students who did excellent work. The second pile was for students who made trivia mistakes. The last pile was for students who were on the wrong track. Then, the present researcher started the matching progress. The principle of peer mentor and mentee matching is simple. Peer mentors need to be capable of helping their peers answer the questions they have on the assignment errors or suggestions made by the instructor (the present researcher). Please note that peer mentors will change according to students' assignment performance. After all, some students do well in one particular assignment, while others do well on others.

However, the researcher does have a rule on peer mentor and mentee matching. First, the researcher needs to make sure there are enough potential peer mentors to assist mentees. Furthermore, peer mentors must not be overloaded. Ideally, one peer mentor will not assist more than 5 mentees. For example, there are 25 students in a class. There are 6 students who have done an excellent work on their assignment. 9 students made only careless mistakes in the assignment, while 10 students were on the wrong track. Then, the researcher places those 6 students' work on the desk. The researcher chose to assign those mentees who were on the wrong track to the peer mentors before those who made careless mistakes for one reason. Students were on the wrong track need more help than those who made careless mistakes. After that, the researcher will start to assign those 9 students to those 6 peer mentors. At this stage, some peer mentors might have more mentees than others since it is not an even distribution. Furthermore, sometimes, those students who made careless mistakes can easily correct their mistakes without any assistance.

It should be noted that it is not necessary to let all the peer mentors have the same number of mentees as others. After all, some peer mentors can handle more mentees than others

even they all have done an excellent work. That is to say, not all mentors have the same ability to mentor (Pullins, Fine & Warren, 2001, p. 133). However, the present researcher suggests not letting a mentor have more than 5 mentees. A mentor in Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss (2008)'s study expressed that mentoring five mentees was overwhelming because it was too time consuming, particularly in negotiating common times to meet. One mentor in their study ended up seeing them in two sessions since she/he couldn't get everyone together in one time. Lastly, the present researcher finds very useful to have the mentor and mentee grouping in a chart for both parties' reference.

Peer Mentor Training

If there are not enough peer mentors because the assignment was too hard, the researcher has the students who made careless mistakes serve as mentors. In this case, peer mentor training will take place. This peer mentor training can take place in class or outside class depending on the researcher's (instructor) and peer mentors' time. The peer mentor training in this case is not a program or workshop peer mentors or mentees have to attend. Instead, it is more like a mentor and mentee relationship between the instructor (mentor) and the peer mentors (mentee). On the other hand, this is the role switch for peer mentors become mentees to the researcher (instructor). The instructor helps them clarify the mistakes they made prior assigning them to assist their peers. The instructor (researcher) plays an important role here. How she assists the peer mentors sets the tone for them to assist their peer mentees.

Peer Mentor and Mentee Interactions

Students do not know which role they play or start the role play (mentor and mentee) until the instructor returns the assignment back to them. Peer mentors receive the name list of their mentees attached to their assignment. Then, the instructor introduces the mentees to their mentors. This is usually done when students do not know each other at the beginning of the semester. However, the instructor goes over the common mistakes students have prior allowing them to work with their peers. The present researcher suggests putting students' common mistakes on PowerPoint. It is easier for instructors to go over them and refer to them in class and in the future.

Once the matches are made, peer mentors and mentees work in class. Peer mentors use the time the researcher (instructor) provides in class to answer mentees' questions about the assignment. Depending on the assignment difficulty level, the researcher suggested that the peer mentoring time in class should not exceed 20 minutes. As peer mentors and mentees work at their own pace on correcting or revising the assignment, it is anticipated that the instructor would serve as a facilitator to answer any questions peer mentors and mentees might raise. It is also very important for the instructor to observe the interaction between peer mentors and mentees. It provides a great chance for the instructors to learn who works well with whom. Sometimes, straight A students do not want to be the mentees of C students who happened to do better than straight A students in that one

particular assignment. This gives instructors an idea how to match peer mentors and mentees the next time.

However, the peer mentors and mentees do not only do work in class, but outside the class as well. Students are expected to use a red pen to correct the mistakes they have in their assignments according to the instructor's comments. After that, they are expected to turn in a corrected version along with the old one. Peer mentees' corrected papers are checked and initialed by the peer mentors prior to turning them in. Thus, peer mentors and mentees might need to find time outside the class if they can't get all the work done in class. The present researcher (instructor) allows the peer mentors to mark the mentees' papers and accepts those assignments as students' final version. However, it is recommended to print out a clear copy if there were too many corrections made in the paper by the peer mentors.

Methodology

A structured survey on peer mentoring was distributed to participants. The total of 35 participants in this study was from the 2 year and 4 year night division college students at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Students accepted into Wenzao division school are from diverse educational, socio-economic, and occupational backgrounds. Many of them are mature age students, retuning to study after a period of time or attempting higher education for the first time.

The present researcher informed participants that they have the right to say no and their class grade will not in jeopardy if they did not want to participate. In addition, their responses will be confidential and no names will be used to protect their identities. All students turned their surveys to the researcher. Responses to open-end questions were transcribed to a word processor verbatim by the researcher. Additionally, from time to time, students were also asked to take time to reflect on their peer mentoring experience while completing the Research Writing in English required course with the present researcher (the class instructor).

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the analyses from the survey data. It also provides discussions of the findings related to challenging and rewarding experiences perceived by peer mentors and mentees.

Challenges Experienced by Peer Mentors and Mentees

Starcevich and Friend (1999) emphasized that mentoring will be more effective if mentees take a proactive role in maintaining contact with their mentors. However, the majority of the participants in this study is married and work full time or part time. Thus, a common complaint for mentors regarding this peer mentor and mentee practice has been finding suitable times to meet with their mentees. For instance, one mentor in

Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss (2008) said that trying to contact people, making arrangements and things not coming together frustrated her/him. Thus, not only poor mentor attendance has a direct effect and may undermine mentees' self-esteem (Karcher, 2005), but also mentees'.

In addition, some peer mentors experienced difficulty getting their mentees to listen to their advice especially when C students become straight A students' mentors. In addition, as a result of busy and different class or working schedules, some students do not want to mentor or be mentored by their peers. Moreover, with the working and family responsibilities of some peer mentors, they found it is a burden when they had to check their peer mentees' paper twice or more.

It might also cause frustration when peer mentors fail to give peer mentees the correct information. Furthermore, some students get upset when they didn't earn a good grade because their peer mentors fail to identify the errors they had on their assignments. After all, Mincy & Wiener (1990)'s study shows that mentors do affect mentees' academic achievement. Some participants in this study believe that the researcher (instructor) should be the one to provide the knowledge and guidance they deserve and desire, not their peers. After all, they pay for it. However, Dorothy Alpert, vice chairman and national sector leader-Real Estate of the Real Estate Practice at Deloitte in Foong (2009)'s study stated that people do not have to have mentoring relationships only with seniors. People can work extraordinarily well with peers.

Rewarding Experienced by Peer Mentors and Mentees

Mentoring sometimes could cause frustration. However, it could be a rewarding experience for both parties as well. Peer mentors expressed that they were glad that they are able to help their peer mentees and share some responsibilities for the instructor. One student said that she is never the one the teacher would count on to assist with anything during her study. Thus, being selected as a peer mentor was a great honor for her and a great motivation for her to do better next time. This participant supports another participant's point in Parry (2010)'s study: many kids want to make a difference, but they just don't know where to start.

Other participants in this study indicated that being a mentor or mentee will help them to develop a bond or friendship with their peers, especially those they don't have the opportunity to work with. One student said she discovered a stronger grasp of the APA (American Psychological Association) format through teaching to others. It is exactly what Ramsey (2009) said, mentoring keeps wisdom from getting lost. In short, a great deal of teaching and learning takes place during the mentoring process (Centeno, 2002) and the mentoring also benefits tutors in gaining leadership skills (Barroquillo, 2010).

Conclusion

This study has explored the nature and effectiveness of peer mentors in assisting college students' research proposal writing in Taiwan. This study provides an example of how peer mentors program can be incorporated within a research writing class. More specifically, this study has demonstrated that peer mentoring benefits college students' research proposal writing. Further, many peer mentors were enthusiastic about the prospect of mentoring. They were glad that they could assist with their peers' research proposal writing. Like Warring (1990) indicated, a mentor program gives students a feeling of belonging instead of having to sink or swim alone. More importantly, it is what one participant in Williams (2009)'s study said, mentoring is about taking the time to show you do care. Moreover, it would be selfish for those who are able or in a position not to give.

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