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Social Justice, Learning Centredness and a First Year Experience Peer Mentoring Program: How Might They Connect?

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Social Justice, Learning Centredness, and a First Year Experience Peer Mentoring Program: How Might They Connect?

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ABSTRACT

Peer mentoring is a powerful strategy to support students in their first year of tertiary education utilised by a large number of tertiary institutions. While social justice principles such as rights, access, and equity as outlined by Creagh, Nelson, & Clarke (2013) highlight the importance of "student centredness," Taylor (2013) explains that "learning centredness" is a more empowering approach when working with students in their first year. Learning centredness focuses on learner engagement and acknowledges the active and combined responsibilities of the learner, the teacher, and support networks. This theoretical paper describes the incorporation of principles of social justice using strategies of learning centredness within a First Year Experience peer mentoring program.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of programs to make the transition to study for first year students successful has become commonplace among many institutions. The First Year Experience (FYE) program at the Faculty of Education and Social Work at The University of Auckland uses a unique philosophical lens combining a social justice model and learning centred pedagogy.

The construct of social justice has been linked to the writings of the early philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) who argued that individuals should be free to make decisions so as to utilise their competences (Nozick, 1974, as cited in Vera and Speight, 2003). Although Locke did not use the term "social justice" in his writing, his emphasis on libertarian justice fits well with the underlying components of current social justice literature (Bell, 1997; Craegh, Nelson, & Clarke, 2013; Neville, 2015; Vera & Speight, 2003; Vincent, 2003). Creagh et al. list five key principles which, in their opinion, form a framework for promoting social justice. These principles are self-determination, rights, access, equity, and participation.

Self-determination focuses on providing opportunities so that individuals can have control over their lives. The principle of *rights* is based on treating people with dignity and acknowledging the impact of social and cultural influences. *Participation* and *access* are based on inclusion with all groups being given the opportunity to utilise beneficial resources, while *equity* aims to reduce the barriers that can impact on success. According to Bell (1997, p. 3), the goal of social justice is:

> full and equal partnership for all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.

In other words, social justice is about providing empowering opportunities for individuals and groups so that they can achieve their desired goals.

Vincent (2003) explains that educational contexts are particularly fruitful sites for social justice interventions because of the crucial role they play in the reproduction of particular identities and social positioning. Equitable educational opportunities for all learners are of paramount importance for life long success, and in New Zealand, our key educational vision is to provide empowering opportunities for all our "young people to become confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 7). This vision is applicable to all levels of education.

The framework of social justice developed by Creagh et al. (2013) interconnects the principles outlined above to form a conceptual model for intervention within a range of educational settings. The principles within this framework are applicable to tertiary education and are explained below in relation to this context. *Self-determination* can give students the chance to contribute to course design through evaluation of content and delivery, as well as making informed decisions about their own participation in courses and programs. Supporting the *rights* of individuals and groups who may be at risk of underachieving may encourage lecturers to take time to obtain information about the students, recognise their rights as learners, and ensure that the system values and supports their needs. Promoting access can lead to intentionally directing students to support services and systems which have been set up to enhance academic engagement and learning. Likewise, commitment to *equity and inclusive participation* can promote support for individuals and underrepresented groups so that the outcomes are fair for all learners. According to Neville (2015) and Kivel (2004), incorporating these principles of social justice within first year mentoring programs has significant benefits for the individuals, such as personal reflection, challenge, and evaluation. While empowerment is at the forefront of social justice, Creagh et al. (2013) highlight the need for shifting the focus from "the individual" towards the individual's learning engagement. They explain that this social justice initiative has the potential to promote the active involvement of the learner.

Learning engagement is a multifaceted construct. Kivel (2014) and Furrer & Skinner (2003, p. 149) describe this process as "active, goal directed, flexible, constructive, persistent focused interactions with the social and physical environments." Taylor (2013) and Severiens, Meeuwisse, and Born (2015) concur with this shift to learning engagement for first year students; however, Taylor (2013) uses the term "learning centredness" to describe this more constructive approach. While acknowledging the importance of understanding the complex needs of students, she argues that a purely student centred focus can result in some passiveness in the learning process rather than the development of a constructive and reciprocal partnership between the teacher, the student, and the support team. Clearly, teachers have a crucial role to play in the learning process (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Hattie,

2009; Hunt & Seney, 2005), especially when they are able to evaluate their effects on student learning. Hattie (2012) explains the need for cognitive awareness from both the teacher and the learner in relation to understanding which pedagogical strategies are working for the learner. According to Taylor (2013), this emphasis on learning centredness should frame practice and reinforce the active role of both the learner and the teacher. Taylor (2013, p. 6) explains that a learning centred approach to teaching students in their first year promotes the use of the following strategies:

- the attributes, prior knowledge, and diverse needs of the learner,
- the responsibilities of the learner to take an active role in their learning,
- the important role of the teacher as designer and/or activator of learning (Hattie, 2009), and
- the role of community in shaping and activating learning.

Our FYE program acknowledges and reinforces the partnership between teacher, student, and learning support and aims to set the students on course for academic success in the future. Pleschová and McAlpine (2015) carried out a systematic review of 17 publications relating to student-to-student mentoring processes at university level. Within this literature, the authors found that there were relatively few publications documenting the details of the mentoring process, and while acknowledging that mentoring has become a common feature in educational programs, they raise grave concerns about the lack of clarity regarding the nature of mentoring used. The FYE mentoring program at the Faculty of Education and Social Work incorporates the principles of social justice (Creagh et al., 2013) with the constructive strategies of learning centredness (Taylor, 2013), and we consider that this provides a sound theoretical base and clear direction for our mentoring program.

THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE PROGRAM (FYE)
Our FYE program combines a faculty-wide peer mentoring scheme for all new undergraduate education students with a tutorial attendance and assignment tracking system which uses analyses of past data to map students' academic progress and identify potentially at risk students. The program works in close collaboration with teaching and support staff and is embedded in one core course of all seven undergraduate degrees offered by the Faculty of Education and Social Work.

This paper focuses primarily on the mentoring component within the FYE program. In particular, this component involved a shift in structure from a top-down, directive model, to a reciprocal model incorporating principles of social justice (Creagh et al., 2013) and strategies of learning centredness (Taylor, 2013). This reciprocal model identifies the unique residual content knowledge of both social justice and learning centredness already present within our group of mentors. In practice, mentors both recognise and design their engagement with mentees to incorporate these two dimensions as well as reporting back to the FYE team, mentors, and staff, thereby ensuring that the two principles are being used to guide their practice.

Mentors

A key operational component of the FYE program is our student mentors. In addition to having an above average academic record (grade point average of 5 or above), prospective mentors have to be recommended by their Program Leader as having appropriate personal qualities for mentoring, such as effective communication skills, leadership, empathy, and a commitment to their studies. FYE trains this cohort of high-achieving second, third, and fourth year student mentors who have the potential to continue to postgraduate level or assume leadership roles beyond their undergraduate degrees. Each mentor is then responsible for a group of 15–25 first year students in the same program of study as the mentor. Mentors meet their group of students on their program orientation day and remain in contact with their groups for the duration of the first year. Mentors offer support by engaging with their group of students using learning centred strategies. Timed information relevant to the student transition cycle is released by the FYE team throughout the semester.

Figure 1 represents the originally proposed top down FYE structure, a model which is restricted by a one-way flow of information from the management unit to the mentors.
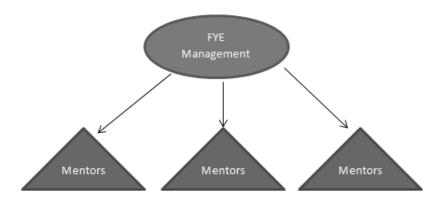

Figure 1. Original FYE structure

Solutions

In 2014 the FYE aimed to incorporate a more "learning-centred" focus. The structure of mentor training was adjusted to be aligned with the strategies of Taylor's (2013) learning centredness and mentors were given avenues to contribute to the program. This structure change to a reciprocal model was emphasised and the nature of mentoring was explored in much more depth within the team of mentors and management.

We discovered through this process that our pool of mentors already had experience with principles of social justice and teaching pedagogy through their program of study. All students had completed courses containing content relating to equity, different learner types, self-efficacy, curriculum areas, as well as the Treaty of Waitangi, which requires graduates to respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of Māori learners and communities and work actively to improve educational outcomes for Māori learners. The identification of this prior knowledge and the opportunity to challenge this

group of high achievers with the application of their knowledge were important angles to foster.

While on practicum placements, mentors have had experience using reflective practice as a tool to evaluate their performance, a practice that actively promotes the use and evaluation of teaching strategies. Recognising the valuable pool of knowledge already present amongst our mentoring cohort, we realised the group of mentors were already equipped to incorporate principles of social justice using strategies of learning centredness. Furthermore, the wider mentoring cohort could actively work together to share experiences on the application of these principles and strategies. This prompted a structure change to the originally proposed FYE, detailed in the next section.

Structure
Figure 2 represents the current FYE program structure, where mentors are required to consider and trial a strategy to achieve a transition goal with their group. They are then required to report back to other mentors about the strategy/strategies they used and to evaluate the effectiveness (or lack thereof).
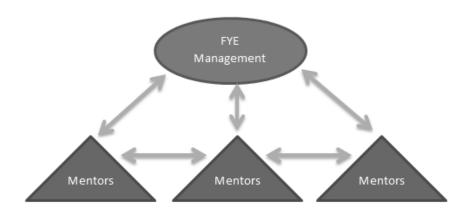

Figure 2. Current FYE program structure

A detailed example of how social justice principles and learning centredness strategies have been incorporated in relation to the way the mentor role is performed is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of social justice principles and learning centredness strategies in FYE

Social justice principles (Creagh et al., 2013)	Learning centredness strategy (Taylor, 2013)	FYE Mentor application (i.e., examples of ongoing interactions and reflection)
RIGHTS	The attributes that students bring to learning, including diverse prior knowledge, diverse approaches to learning, and diverse learning needs.	Mentors are trained to give individualised responses that are personalised towards the student. Training and communications are designed to remind mentors of inclusive practices.
SELF-DETERMINATION	The active role and responsibilities of the learner.	Mentors encourage and guide the students to develop a constructive partnership between their teacher and themselves, thereby promoting the skills of learning engagement.
ACCESS	The role of researchers, communities, and disciplines in shaping and activating learning.	Mentors facilitate the interaction between students and the support services available based on the service most appropriate for the individual student's needs.
EQUITY	The attributes that students bring to learning, including diverse prior knowledge, diverse approaches to learning, and diverse learning needs. The role of researchers, communities, and disciplines in shaping and activating learning.	Mentors are encouraged to explain and demystify course content and expectations, as well as to foster the link to appropriate cultural support.
PARTICIPATION	The role of researchers, communities, and disciplines in shaping and activating learning. The significant role and responsibilities of the teacher (and/or learning support staff) as the designer and/or activator of learning.	Mentors promote learning engagement through inclusive practices. Mentors provide an opportunity for initial and ongoing social integration within their group. Whatever happens, they will always have a friend.

How can FYE management promote mentors' use of learning centred strategies with their students?

FYE management has two main ongoing interactions with mentors (post-training): orientation organisation and the follow-up of students. In short, these are two additional areas where it is possible for management to influence the responsiveness of mentors.

Other iterations of the FYE ask mentors to "check in on their student" or to "see whether everything is ok." The most common criticism of this practice is that it is too student centred. As a result, we began including leading questions in our communication to mentors designed to enhance "relational responsiveness" (Pryce, 2012, p. 288), to engage their own expertise, and draw on strategies learnt in training. An example would be:

> "We have noticed your student xx has been missing from class for the last two weeks; her online activity shows that she has stopped viewing class forums or lecture material. What do you think will achieve the best outcome for this student?"

Utilising these opportunities reinforced the standard and type of action required. A pleasing outcome was that mentors took increased ownership over their role and a more attuned interaction was evident between first year students and their mentors.

SUMMARY

Incorporating social justice principles (Creagh et al., 2013) and learning centredness (Taylor, 2013) in our FYE program at the Faculty of Education and Social Work was achieved in the mentoring context in three ways:

1. Utilising strategies to best enhance the expert knowledge already present within the mentor group;
2. Examining communication points from management to mentors, including
   a. Designing management-to-mentor interactions to reinforce expectations, and
   b. Designing a program structure that facilitates reciprocity between all parties; and
3. Continuing evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies above in relation to the learning needs of the students.

Having FYE management facilitate conversations between mentors was initially a way to mediate the strategies being used, ensuring they were "learning centred." Unexpectedly this also created a feedback loop back to management. Making mentoring about a chance to trial professional skills was a positive way to shift the focus from the mentors' desire to "do good" to accomplishing the tasks that have the potential to ensure a successful transition for students.

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