



STUDENT MENTORING HANDBOOK

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What is Mentoring?

There are many definitions of mentoring. One common definition is:

“A person who is more experienced in a particular context helping a less experienced person achieve their goals.”

Mentoring has been adopted in public and private organisations and business, and has been explored in developmental psychology, management and education. Mentoring is usually focussed on professional development and achievement in a particular area. It also generally refers to helping relationships that are both reciprocal and personal.

In an educational context, the work of the student mentor has been defined in the following way:

“The mentor acts as a facilitator and a catalyst for learning rather than as a ‘teacher’. The learner is responsible for her own learning. The mentor is responsible for supporting, facilitating and learning with the learner.” (Kehoe 2007, p. 6).



Benefits of mentoring



Activity 1

Why do mentoring?

Consider for a moment why you decided to take on mentoring. Below are some commonly cited benefits of mentoring. Which ones apply to you? (Tick the box.)

- Consolidate your knowledge in a particular area
- Gain new perspectives
- Gain additional recognition and respect
- Challenge yourself to achieve something
- Develop leadership and interpersonal skills
- Put something back into the RMIT community
- Gain a sense of satisfaction

Other benefits: RMIT research

At RMIT, research on peer tutoring programs is currently being conducted by Andrea Chester and Sophia Xenos (2008), lecturers in Psychology in the School of Health Sciences.

Their current project aims to evaluate peer tutoring in four programs across the colleges. It follows a pilot project which reported on the 2008 Psychology Peer Assisted Tutorial Support (PPATS) program. Results from the pilot project suggest that this student mentoring program had the following impact on first year students:

- enhanced academic and social transition
- improved critical skills and pass rates
- improved grades and retention
- improved academic self-efficacy
- students reported lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress in comparison to controls.

- students reported higher levels of self-esteem and improved problem solving ability following participation in PPATS.

Improved grades.
Increased self-esteem.

Other benefits identified by first year students included increased motivation, improved study techniques and confidence as academic learners, increased social engagement, and enhanced motivation to attend classes and engage in learning.

A range of benefits was also noted for mentors, including:

- consolidation of academic skills
- Improvement in leadership competencies
- a heightened sense of purpose and responsibility
- positively impacted on the peer tutors' anxiety, and stress lower upon completion of the program
- an increase for peer tutors in academic self-efficacy and in self-esteem following participation in PPATS.

Mentors also benefit.
Consolidate academic skills.

Who are your mentees?

Your mentees are usually first year students. Reflect on your own first year experience. What problems were you confronting? How did you resolve them? What stands out for you from that year? What were challenges facing students in your group?



Activity 2

Remembering your first year

Write or draw your recollections of your first year at university.

Keeping in mind your own experiences, and those of fellow students, what areas of university life do you think first year students would most like help with?

Reflect on your experience of studying the subject you are now mentoring in. What caused you problems? What resources did you use? What resources do you wish you had used? Jot down some ideas for assisting first year students in this subject.

The mentoring role

There is a growing body of literature on the subject of mentoring. David Clutterbuck, in his classic book on the subject, *Everyone needs a mentor: Fostering talent at work* (1991, p. 36), draws from his research to compile the following description of the mentoring role:

M

- Manages the relationship
- Maintains a steady presence
- Has high level self-management skills
- Is assertive, clear about boundaries and management skills
- Has excellent interpersonal skills

E

- Encourages
- Motivates others
- Is a good role model
- Able to provide clear and objective feedback
- Finds and focuses on the positive

N

- Nurtures
- Fosters independence and personal responsibility
- Is able to maintain work-life balance
- Acknowledges need to maintain health
- Respects higher goals, values and spiritual needs

T

- Teaches
- Understands the mentee's learning needs
- Offers opportunities for learning
- Provides or directs to resources
- Accepts and responds to different learning styles

O

- Offers mutual respect
- Accepts differences in values, interests
- Avoids judgement
- Maintains a relationship of equality

R

- Responds to the mentee's needs
- Does not seek to impose advice on the basis of own needs
- Acts as a resource base

Keeping in touch with each other

As well as keeping in touch with your mentees it can be a good idea to keep in touch with the other mentors in your program so you can share ideas, brainstorm problems and help each other find solutions.

You can communicate in the following ways:

- Create a basic email or phone list so that you can talk or send each other information.
- Hold regular feedback and debriefing meetings to talk about how things are going. These might have a social component too.
- Use Facebook as a networking and communication tool.
- Create a mentors' blog or wiki so you can relate your experiences, ask each other questions and respond.

Sometimes one person might take the role of managing or co-ordinating meetings or web postings or this role could be rotated. Some programs find ways to give the co-ordinating person a small reward for their extra effort.

If you can build your own networks and have fun with each other while you mentor – everyone's a winner!

Summary

Your work as a student mentor has a considerable impact on your mentees, yourself and on the RMIT community. The benefits are well-documented and include improvements in grades and in self-confidence for the mentees, and consolidation of learning and leadership skills for the mentors.

The most significant aspect of your work is that of supporting and encouraging your mentees in the challenging context of their first year at university. It's also useful to keep in mind strategies for supporting your own group of mentors, such as keeping in touch through the internet. Student mentoring demands skills in a range of areas, most importantly, in interpersonal relations and communication.

Communication

Improving your communication

Good communication is the key to your work as a mentor. Although we communicate daily, our skills in this area can always be improved. The challenge is one of becoming aware of what assists the process of mutual understanding and information exchange, and what hinders it.

As a mentor you will be involved in facilitating learning—your own and that of the mentees. Learning happens in situations where people feel confident that their ideas, thoughts, questions and concerns will be received and responded to in an attentive and non-judgemental way. You can cultivate such situations by using the following strategies and techniques:

- Active listening
- Appropriate body language
- Reflecting feelings and paraphrasing
- Questioning
- Giving Feedback
- Diversity awareness - communicating across cultures

Active listening

Successful communication depends on a person's ability to listen to the other person and respond appropriately. It is an active process which doesn't happen automatically; it entails conscious use of skills that, in time, become unconscious practice.





Activity 3

Find the Opposite – Good and Bad Listening Skills

Look at the good and poor listening strategies. Complete any missing sections.

POOR LISTENING	GOOD (ACTIVE) LISTENING
Thinking of what you want to say while the speaker is speaking	
Interrupting	
Asking too many questions	
Asking factual questions with single word answers	
	Asking clarifying questions
Responding to what you think the mentee asked	
	Paraphrasing
	Back-channelling (oh, aha, umm...)
Helpful body language. (examples): 	Unhelpful body language. (examples):

Body language

‘SOLER’*

Effective attending is often described in terms of five behaviours that are introduced by Gerard Egan (1990) in terms of the acronym SOLER. Research has suggested that speakers feel more trusting of listeners who use these attending behaviours.

S Square

This involves facing the speaker square on, with your shoulders in parallel line with the speaker. When in a group, you may need to adjust your position subtly in order to face the person speaking. However, such an adjustment can be quite powerful. It communicates that the person speaking has your full attention.

O Open

Here you adopt an open posture, particularly with your arms. This is a trusting position in contrast to one where arms are crossed, a position which can give the impression of withholding or self-protection.

L Lean

If you’re sitting in conversation with another person, lean forward slightly. This conveys interest and involvement, and focuses your attention on the other person. The focus should be not be too intense, however, as this may be felt to be intrusive. It is important to be aware of cultural norms as the gender of the people involved can influence the body language that is appropriate.

E Eye

Eye contact is an important part of communication. Avoidance of eye contact can be interpreted as indicating mistrust and evasion, and interferes with the building of rapport. It can cause the other person to disengage from the conversation. As with leaning forward, eye contact which is too intense can also interfere with communication. Here soft eye contact is appropriate, that is, regular, gentle eye contact that is not too intense but doesn’t avoid a direct, relaxed gaze. Appropriate cultural practices should be followed here as with other aspects of body language.

R Relax

Ultimately, all previous postural positions will generally be adopted if you are relaxed and self-aware. Conversations are more

fluid and dynamic when both parties are calm and at ease. Your level of relaxation will be obvious from your body language, so be aware of how you are positioned physically, take a deep breath and allow yourself to relax.

Reflecting feelings and paraphrasing

Reflecting the feelings of the speaker is a highly effective way of letting them know you have heard what they are saying. It can be done in words and body language. If the person says “It’s just getting too difficult”, you can reflect their feelings by saying something like ‘Yes it is hard going at times...’

Another effective way to establish communication and rapport is to reflect the speaker’s content back to them in your own words. This is called a paraphrase and it sends out a strong message that you are listening.

Examples

‘So you’re saying that....’

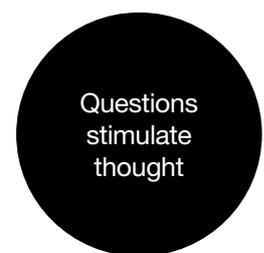
‘I think that you are suggesting that....’

A paraphrase asks for clarification and ensures that you have interpreted the speaker’s message correctly. It sometimes helps the speaker to hear what they are saying in a different way: they may gain a new idea or insight from hearing the paraphrase.

Questioning*

Well-placed questions are valuable communication tools. Questions stimulate students to do the thinking and talking. They encourage interaction and direct the course of the discussion. Most importantly, astute questions can assist students to think through the answer to their own question themselves, or come to see applications and contexts for an idea they might have.

In your work as a mentor, consciously develop your questioning skills by noting the response of mentees to your questions. Note their body language. You will be able to tell a lot about your mentees response by paying attention to their facial expression and the way they move their body. Sometimes questions can be felt to be intrusive, or abrupt, or pretentious if couched in highly conceptual or abstract language. By noting the responses to your questions, you will develop the ability to use questions creatively —to open up discussion, facilitate learning and invite participation.





Thinking that hits the mark

Clarifying questions

These are used when you are unclear about a person's statements or questions. You ask for meaning or more information. Clarify by rephrasing what you think is the statement or the question, and then ask for elaboration.

Examples

- What do you mean by...?
- Could you explain that in a little more detail?
- Could you go over that again for me?
- Anything else you would like to add to that?
- Can you be more specific?



Taking thinking to a deeper level

Probing questions

Your task as a mentor is to help students genuinely interact with the material by clarifying it for themselves, thinking critically about it, putting it in their own words and relating it to other knowledge and concepts.

Probing questions support you in this role. They assist the student to arrive at a new and deeper level of understanding through their own thought processes.

Examples

- How do you relate this to....?
- That's a really interesting idea. What makes you think that?
- If that's the case here, what would apply in the case of ...?
- What would be the implications of this for...?



Turning thinking back on itself

Questions to develop critical awareness

It can be really helpful for a student to be asked to reflect on their point of view or a claim they are making. Questions can be asked which encourage the student to develop a critical awareness not only of what they

are thinking but also how their thinking is dependent on certain assumptions or evidence.

Examples

- What do you think you might be assuming here?

- Could you give an example of that?
- What evidence might support that claim?
- How could we investigate the truth of that?
- Are you sure?
- How might someone argue against that point?

Reframing questions

Questions which focus on relationships can help students to see a concept or an idea from another perspective. Such questions reframe the idea by providing a new or different context for it.

Examples

- How is that related to...?
- How does that tie into?
- How does that compare with...?
- If that's true, what would happen if...?

* (The above material on questioning has been adapted from Miller, V., Oldfield, E., & Murtagh, Y. (2006), *Peer Assisted Study Sessions: Leader development handbook*. (The University of Queensland). Retrieved from <http://mams.rmit.edu.au/do9j1ht17lilz.pdf>)

Open and closed questions

Closed questions reduce the response options. For example, to the question 'Did you enjoy the lecture?' a speaker can simply answer 'yes' or 'no'. This means that there is no depth of information. It confirms or refutes a simple fact. Closed questions can be useful for simple clarification but do not encourage elaboration.

Open questions encourage the speaker to give more specific, precise and revealing information and show you are really interested in their ideas and responses to the material. For example: 'Tell me about the lecture.'



Thinking outside the box



Activity 4

Open the Door to Conversation

Change the following closed questions into open questions. They need not be exact matches to the closed questions, but simply more effective openings to conversations.

CLOSED QUESTIONS	OPEN QUESTIONS
Where do you come from?	Could you tell me a bit about yourself?
How long has this problem been going on?	Can you tell me more about the problem?
Are you sure this is what you want to do?	
Did you have any problems finding the address?	
Will you be going back to [your country] over summer?	
What are you studying?	
Do you like pizza?	

“[T]he most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be ‘dollops of feedback.’”

(Hattie, 1992, p. 9)

Giving feedback

In your role as mentor, you will find yourself in situations where it is necessary to provide feedback to your mentees. You may need to comment on a mentee’s work, their contribution to a discussion, or their behaviour. This needs to be done in a way that is sensitive as well as effective.

Providing feedback is not a matter of simply telling the mentee what you think. It is important to frame your feedback so that it acknowledges the positive achievement in whatever you are providing feedback on. Then you can provide an objective evaluation and a structure for improvement. It is also more effective

if this can be done in a collaborative and collegial manner rather than from a position of power.

When giving feedback on a student’s work, it is often helpful to first point out something that was done well and then to draw attention to what needs to be done differently.

For example

‘You have a lot of really interesting and relevant information here. The problem is with the organisation of the material. It needs to be clear to the reader how this information relates to your argument. Let’s look at how you might do that.’

Feedback is also a way of learning more about ourselves and the effect our behaviour has on others. Constructive feedback increases self-awareness, offers options and encourages development, so it is important to learn to both give it and receive it.

However, constructive feedback does not simply mean giving positive feedback. Negative feedback, given skilfully, can be very important and useful. One mentor who was facilitating a group discussion had problems

with two students who were talking and playing noughts and crosses in the session. In a situation like this you can name the behaviour that is causing the problem, say what its impact is on you, and ask for a response from the person involved.

For example

I notice you're playing noughts and crosses and talking. I'm finding this quite distracting. Is there something I can do here to involve you in the work we're doing?'

Summary

In your work as a mentor, there will be occasions when you will need to consciously utilize techniques and strategies to make your communication more effective. These strategies become automatic with practice. Active listening, appropriate body language, reflecting and paraphrasing, giving constructive feedback, and questioning all contribute to building rapport with your mentees and ensuring that your work is productive. Awareness of the implications of diversity among the people you are working with is also a highly significant aspect of successful communication.



Activity 5

Deliver your own feedback

Think of a project, assignment, task or job that you have done recently. This may or may not be related to your study. If possible, choose one that you feel could have been better but had also gone well in some way(s). Put yourself in the shoes of your teacher or supervisor. Write down your own feedback as if you were the supervisor/teacher. Be honest about what needs improvement (but at the same time don't beat yourself up). Remember the principles of what good feedback should entail.

Awareness of diversity



Definition of culture

The most common usage of the word 'culture' relates it to ethnicity and nationality: to the languages we speak, traditions we follow and religious beliefs we adhere to. However, culture can refer to more generalised contexts; for example, it is often defined as referring to the set of shared attitudes, values, beliefs, goals and practices that characterise an institution, organization or group.

This concept of culture is being utilised when we talk about a particular culture existing within an organisation, or we acknowledge the existence of sub-cultures within the wider community.

The concept of culture is complex as cultures are rarely homogenous. Within cultures there exist groups or sub-cultures which have their own specific set of values, beliefs and attitudes. There can be a football culture or an organisational culture as well as different social groupings within cultures based on such differentiating indicators as age or gender. So the term 'culture' has to be elastic to account for the multiple identities people assume in their lives.

Cross-cultural competence

The task in developing cross cultural competence is to become aware of the cultural differences that may exist between yourself and the other person while simultaneously becoming aware of similarities in social group identities. For example, two people may belong to different cultures but are both students studying the same course, or are both women, or members of an environmental group, or men with children, or young people with disabilities, or mature aged students. The ethnic / nationality differences are mitigated by the areas in which they share values, attitudes, and beliefs according to their affiliation to a particular social group.

Young students from a number of different cultures may feel they have more in common with each other than they have with people of an older age group of the same culture. In communication, it is important to be aware of areas of shared perspectives as well as to respect the differences of nationality or ethnicity.



Activity 6

Cross Cultural Effectiveness

Matveev and Nelson (2004, p. 257) designed the following model for judging cross cultural effectiveness of Russian and American managers. Give yourself a mark out of 10 for each feature.

Interpersonal Skills	Score	Cultural Uncertainty	Score	Cultural Empathy	Score
Ability to acknowledge differences in communication and interaction styles		Ability to deal with cultural uncertainty		Ability to see and understand the world from others' cultural perspectives	
Ability to deal with misunderstandings		Ability to display patience		Exhibiting a spirit of inquiry about other cultures, values, beliefs and communication patterns	
Awareness of your own cultural conditioning		Openness to cultural differences		Ability to accept different ways of doing things	
Knowledge of other countries, cultures and languages of team members		Willingness to accept change and risk		Non-judgemental stance towards the ways things are done in other cultures	
TOTAL		TOTAL		TOTAL	

Summary

Mentors can improve their cross-cultural competence by developing their interpersonal skills, their ability to tolerate cultural uncertainty, and their capacity for cultural empathy. Mentors value and respect other cultures when they show a keen interest in their mentee's country of origin and display a desire to learn about it. It is important to be aware of cultural differences and respectful of them, while simultaneously focussing on areas of shared meaning and values.

Awareness of diversity also involves being conscious of the fact that a diverse range of social groups exist within cultures. It is important to be aware of, and sensitive to, the particular experiences of such groups, for example mature age students, people with disabilities, rural students, and so on.

Communication is enhanced by the discovery of shared areas of interest. The obvious one is that you are all students studying the same course but there are sure to be others. These can be emphasized to establish a positive mentoring relationship, one that is enlarged and enriched by the differences between you, and held firm by the interests and experiences you share.

Facilitating a group

The small study group

One of the roles you may have as a mentor is to facilitate a small study group. This will draw on your communication skills and require some awareness of how to guide a group through a learning situation to achieve particular learning outcomes.

Research shows that peer learning is effective precisely because it happens interactively amongst peers. As students, both you and your mentees are facing a similar predicament. There is not the usual distance and formality that can characterise the teacher-student context. This allows for a more direct understanding of the challenges facing your mentees and for open and easy communication.

The model for the study group you will be facilitating is that drawn from theories of collaborative and cooperative learning. These models highlight the interactive, participatory nature of the learning experience. As the facilitator of the group, you will be responsible for encouraging everyone in the group to participate, and for guiding the group so that it generally stays 'on task' for the duration of the session.

The highlight of the training was splitting up into small groups and talking about interesting things.

Student Mentor



Stages of group development

Educational psychologist Bruce Tuckman (2001, p. 66) has described five distinct stages that most groups go through when they come together and begin to work as a team:

1. Forming - introductions
2. Storming - unsettled
3. Norming - getting down to business
4. Performing – achieving task goals
5. Adjourning - disengaging

Awareness of these stages can assist you to recognise the process you are engaged in with your group. These stages are not fixed and rigid. What generally happens is that the group moves through them or reverts back to earlier states according to the task at hand. The objective is to reach the 'performing' stage but all stages are important in the process. It is useful to recognise that it is necessary to work through the other stages before the work of 'performing' can happen. Some groups don't make this phase.

Stage 1: Forming

In this initial stage there is generally a desire on the part of group members to want to be accepted by others and avoid conflict or controversy. Icebreakers are very useful at this time to help people to get to know each other. The organisation of the team becomes a focus of the group (who does what etc). At the same time, there is a level of testing and dependence, orientation to the task, and information is gathered about other group members.

Avoidance of conflict

Icebreakers are very useful at this time to help people to get to know each other. The organisation of the team becomes a focus of the

Stage 2: Storming

This can be a time of intra-group conflict as people begin to respond emotionally to the task. There can also be resistance to group influence and to task requirements, possibly causing minor confrontations. The challenge of getting to the real work of

An unsettled time – different approaches

the group will be welcomed by some members but others will want to remain in the dependency of Stage 1. Conflict may arise between those who want to have structural clarity and rules and those who want spontaneity and open-endedness.

Stage 3: Norming

Ways of working are established and the scope of the task and individual roles becomes clear and agreed. Having dealt with some conflict, people understand each other better and can appreciate each others' skills and experience. Individuals listen and appreciate each other and are prepared to change pre-conceived ideas.

Clarity and agreement on task and roles

Stage 4: Performing

Not all groups reach this stage which is characterised by interdependence and flexibility. Everyone knows and trusts each other, and roles and responsibilities can change in an almost seamless way. Group identity, loyalty and morale are high. Members are equally task-oriented and people oriented. No energy is wasted and everyone is involved in getting the task done.

Morale and energy are high, task getting done

Stage 5: Adjourning

This is a time to reflect on what was learned in the session. Students can be given the opportunity to talk about the one idea or concept that was most significant for them. A review of the work covered helps retention, and an awareness of what was learned in the session consolidates that learning. It's also a time to plan for the next session and remind people of the tasks and topics that the group will be working on next time you all meet.

Consolidation of learning

The first session

Introductions*

- Make sure you come prepared: know the topic, have your list of resources and any other relevant notes and handouts.
- Arrive early. Organise the furniture so that people are sitting facing each other in a circle.
- Welcome everyone to the group and introduce yourself. You could briefly talk about your own experience of the subject you're studying and your experience of being a first year student. You could also emphasise that you are a student yourself, not an expert, and you're here to facilitate the group learning experience, to act as a guide, and to point them in the direction of useful resources.

Relax!

- Have an icebreaker prepared so that students can get acquainted. Get the students to write their name on a sticky label—it is very important to get to know the names of the people in your group as quickly as possible. (For a good list of ice breakers, see below.)
- Be relaxed and friendly, make everyone feel welcome, and maintain this feeling throughout the session.

The session

- First, provide an overview of what you are going to be working on during the session.

Refer questions back to the group

- Ask students if they have any questions they would like addressed or problems with the material the group will be covering. Once the group discussion is underway, these questions and problems can

be put to the group as a whole to work on; don't jump in yourself and try to answer them. Encourage students to participate by letting them know that their contributions are welcome.

- Make good use of questions. Use open questions and clarifying questions to get students talking but don't target individual students.
- Allow for silences, particularly after you've asked a question. Often people need time to reflect on the question and articulate an answer.
- Avoid taking on the responsibility for providing answers – you're here to assist students to discover how to find the answers for themselves.

Time!

- Don't interrupt students when they're talking.
- Be aware of the time during the session. You need to achieve a balance between being receptive to students' discussion within the group, and generally keeping on task so that you

get the topics of the day covered.

Adjourning

- Leave enough time at the end of the session to review what you've done.
- Ask the students to summarise the main points that emerged in the discussion and give their views on what was particularly interesting or significant to them personally.
- Give out information relating to next week's session

– the area to be covered, guidance on what to study, references to check etc.

- Thank everyone for coming, give students time to have some brief interaction as they leave the room and return furniture to where it was.

What was particularly significant in the session?

**(Adapted from Miller, V., Oldfield, E., & Murtagh, Y. (2006). Peer Assisted Study Sessions: Leader development handbook. (The University of Queensland). Retrieved from <http://mams.mit.edu.au/do9j1ht17lilz.pdf>)*

Some useful icebreakers

Getting to know you

Introduce yourself to a person in the group you don't know. Ask them for three interesting facts about themselves (e.g. course, hobbies, favourite place in the world). Exchange information, then introduce each other to the main group.

Geography

Taking RMIT as the central compass point, all students arrange themselves in relation to each other according to where they live. Then students introduce themselves to the person next to them, asking each other questions relating to their shared locality, e.g. transport to RMIT, shopping, sports venues. Everyone returns to their seats and then introduces their partner to the main group, highlighting those aspects of their lives that they share.

Memory icebreaker

When each person introduces themselves, request that they give themselves an adjective starting with the same letter as their name, e.g. Argumentative Amelia. After everyone has been introduced to the group, the first person gives his or her name. The second person gives the first person's name and then his own name: Argumentative Amelia, Happy Harry. The third person starts at the beginning, reciting each person's name before her and adding her own: Argumentative Anna, Happy Harry, Zany Zelda. Continue until each person in the whole group can recite all the names.

Three words

Ask your students to think of three words they would use to describe themselves. After a few minutes, go around the room, ask participants to introduce themselves and share the three words that best describe them. Invite questions for fun. This can be used to help people remember each other's names

and as an energizer to begin a session. (Alternatively, you can also ask students to name an animal they think represents them symbolically, or something from the vegetable kingdom, or a colour.)

Group dynamics

In any group, there will always be different personalities with both strengths and weaknesses that impact on the group dynamics.

STRATEGIES

CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

The quiet student

At the end of a session, you could ask the quiet student how they're finding the work in a friendly, open way to encourage them to let you know if they are having problems with the work. Otherwise, simply generally encourage participation and eventually the quiet student may join in.

The disruptive student

It is sometimes helpful to ask this student if they have a problem with the work the group is engaged with, and, explaining the impact their behaviour is having on you, name the behaviour. For example, you could say 'I'm feeling disturbed by your conversations and I'm finding it difficult to hear what others are saying. Would you like to share your ideas with the group?'

The dominant student

When there is a particular student who is dominating the group, you could acknowledge the value of their ideas and request a contribution from the other

If you have a problem in your group and you can't think of a way to manage it, talk to your mentor partner or your champion about it and get their advice.

members of the group. For example, you could say 'Thanks for your contribution, John, it's an interesting point of view. Would someone else in the group like to share their ideas about that?'

The most effective

general strategy for difficult situations is to focus on encouraging participation and collaboration through use of questions, sharing your own experiences, and creating a friendly, interactive environment. Sometimes there are situations you can't do anything about directly other than use strategies that encourage participation in the group. Often, eventually, the quiet student may venture an opinion or an idea and difficult behaviours are moderated. Remember, the students are responsible for their own learning; you are responsible for facilitating that learning.

STRATEGIES

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

Use students' names.

This will encourage the group's cohesiveness and help people feel they belong. See the section on icebreakers for a way of helping you remember names.

Use students' names

Encourage students to share their thoughts and ideas.

Ask open questions, invite people to express a point of view.

Respect students' questions

Break the issue down into stages or sections.

For example, you could ask 'What is the first step to be dealt with here?' or 'What are the stages we need to consider in dealing with this problem?'

Encourage students' questions.

Ask if there are any questions and give students time to answer.

Share the problems you had with the material

Always show respect for students' questions and if you don't know the answer, say you don't know and/or say you'll find out the answer and get back to them (make sure you do!). It's always good to turn questions over to the group as a whole to discuss. If they don't seem to have answers, you could perhaps set the question for the group to investigate for next week's session.

Avoid interrupting students. The freedom to express a point of view or ask a question and be heard is an important factor in establishing a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for group members.

Share your own

experience of learning the concept or topic under discussion. For example, if students seem to be having difficulties with understanding, you could tell them your own problems with the material when you first encountered it.

Encourage students to talk to each other rather than direct all their contributions to you

Often the point at which learning really begins to happen is when you don't need to facilitate the group at all – students are working on the task at hand, discussing the topic and exchanging ideas. Encourage members of the group to talk to each other rather than direct all their contributions to you. It's a good idea to step back and allow the group space to exchange ideas among themselves and develop perspectives on the problem under discussion.

Learning Styles



Preferences
for learning
by seeing, by
listening, or
doing — or by a
combination of
styles

The VAK system (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic)*

The VAK learning styles system is based on the understanding that different people learn in different ways. Some people find it impossible to learn by just listening to someone talk, no matter how well they do it. Others take in very little from reading. These preferences apply to people from all walks of life. In every class you will have a mixture of different styles: some will have a preference for learning by doing, others for listening or watching. This means that it is best to present material for learning in different ways via visuals, speaking, print-based materials and also to encourage active learning experiences.



Activity 6

Learning Styles

Think about the following questions:

Can you focus if a speaker is talking but not using any visuals?

Do you find you need to take notes or do something with your hands when you concentrate?

Do you remember faces rather than names?

When you get some new electronic equipment such as a mobile phone or a CD player is your first instinct to:

- grab the instruction book and start reading?
- fiddle with it until you get it working?
- ask someone to show you how it works?
- ask someone to explain to you how it works?

There are also many instruments designed for people to assess their own learning style or preference. A simple search of the web will locate a huge variety. One basic categorization of learner preferences that is useful to keep in mind when planning learning involves preferences for seeing, hearing or doing. These are usually called visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learning preferences.

Pictures, diagrams, text, films, videos, demonstrations

Visual Learners

Visual learners attend to information most effectively when they see something, for example, pictures, diagrams, text, films and videos or demonstrations. For example, these types of learners often

forget names but remember faces, like to talk to people face to face, spell by visualizing the words and use phrases such as 'I see what you mean' or 'how does this look to you?'

Auditory Learners

Auditory learners are more interested in learning through spoken words. They prefer to learn by listening, engaging in discussion, and are attracted to and distracted by sounds. They tend to spell using phonetics and use phrases such as 'how does it sound' or 'can you hear what I'm saying?'

Discussion, lectures, audio media

Kinaesthetic Learners

Kinaesthetic learners engage with material most effectively by doing something active, using their hands or body somehow. They prefer to 'learn by doing'. They need to apply the information and make it their own by constructing something or practising a technique or skill. Often they take notes or even draw pictures or doodle whilst listening as this helps them to concentrate. These learners remember best what they did, rather than what they listened to or observed. They tend to use phrases such as "How does it feel?" or "I need to get more of a grasp of the subject".

Doing something active, using hands and body, learning by doing

STRATEGIES

MANAGING DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

For visual learners

- Use diagrams, pictures, flow charts, maps and the like to support text
- Include stories in your group discussion as they involve mental pictures and images that visual learners can identify with.
- Model strategies to 'deconstruct' text or notes by using coloured highlighters and underlining to emphasize main or key points

For auditory learners

- Involve students in debating and discussing (whole group, pairs, and small groups).
- Develop questions which involve 're-telling', for example, summarising their reading, explaining a process or procedure that has been demonstrated or read about
- Encourage students to make audio tapes of classes
- Encourage students to read notes aloud when studying.

For kinaesthetic learners

- Include active learning opportunities

- Provide opportunities to test their learning by applying it in new situations either through problem solving or practical or simulated activities, such as role plays
- Build in opportunities to transform the learning input in some way, for example, constructing models, drawing diagrams, explaining to others
- Encourage students to learn by teaching someone else a skill or technique

Diverse learning preferences: a combination of strategies

- If you are introducing new terminology make sure that you write the new words on the board to accommodate the visual learners, or use diagrams, pictures or charts wherever possible to extend understanding of the spoken or written word.
- Sitting through talks and lectures is particularly hard for kinaesthetic learners. Break up or 'chunk' material with learner activities or introduce anecdotal stories or discussions in groups or pairs.
- Encourage activities which can be done in small groups or pairs to facilitate active student 'learning by doing'.



Activity 7

Learning styles questionnaire — what type of learner are you? Do you have more than one style?

Circle your preferred approach

1. I learn best from:
 - a. diagrams, pictures or handouts
 - b. hearing a good explanation or having a discussion
 - c. either taking notes or being involved in some activity
2. If I can't find something, I:
 - a. picture where I might I have left it
 - b. either talk to myself about where I may have left it or ask others for ideas
 - c. physically retrace my steps
3. When I am learning something new, like running a new piece of software, I generally:
 - a. refer to the manual
 - b. ask others to explain the instructions to me
 - c. just jump in, make mistakes and learn as I go
4. I solve problems most easily by:
 - a. visualising how they could be solved
 - b. discussing possible solutions with others
 - c. working on the problem
5. When I want to concentrate, I'm most easily distracted by:
 - a. seeing people moving around
 - b. noises, music or people talking
 - c. physical discomfort, such as being either too hot or too cold
6. When I am reading a book, I:
 - a. see the characters in my mind as if I am watching a movie
 - b. pay most of my attention to what the characters are saying
 - c. feel for the characters and identify with their experiences

7. When I spell difficult words, I would prefer to:
 - a. see the word in my mind or write it down to see how it looks
 - b. hear it in my mind or sound the words out
 - c. see the word on paper or in my mind to find out if it feels right

8. I would find it easier to:
 - a. draw a picture, diagram or sketch of something
 - b. write a letter, story or compose a song
 - c. make something or do an experiment

If you have a majority of

- a) answers your learning style is **visual**
- b) answers your learning style is **auditory**
- c) answers your learning style is **kinaesthetic**

*(Material in this section has been adapted from Marr, B & Morgan, B 2005, *Understanding learning styles*. (RMIT University). Retrieved November 10, 2009, from <http://mams.rmit.edu.au/osea2bus7vdv.pdf>)

Summary

Being aware of the learning style which is dominant for you is the first step in working with the learning styles of others. For example, if you are predominantly a visual learner you will need to develop your skills in presenting materials in the other styles as well as visually. If your mentee doesn't seem to understand a particular step or concept, go from a diagram or text, to talking about it, then to doing something which demonstrates it. Knowledge of learning styles helps when developing material to present to your mentees.

Peer Learning



Learning as a social act

Student mentor programs (also called peer tutoring programs) are a growing trend in tertiary institutions. This growth has taken place within the broad context of the education reform theories of the seventies, and the mounting evidence of their value across a range of parameters and models.

Models of student mentoring within academic-focussed courses are generally aligned with theories that give emphasis to learning as a social act, such as theories of collaborative learning and constructivist theories of knowledge acquisition.

Collaborative and Constructivist Theories

Kenneth Bruffee (1999) has worked intensively in the area of collaborative learning. He argues for the importance to learning of interdependence and constructive human interaction and conversation. Peer tutoring and student mentoring is also informed by the constructivist theories of knowledge developed

by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. They focus on the way knowledge is constructed through internalisation, a process that occurs in dialogue and conversation through reflection, listening, questioning, and articulating ideas.

Most modern educational theorists accept the importance of students constructing their own learning, by challenging their pre-existing beliefs and assumptions, rather than passively receiving knowledge that is transmitted from above.

Whether facilitating a small group or working one-to-one, your work as a student mentor relies on the collaborative nature of the engagement. You are working with your peers and this element of the relationship is highly significant to the effectiveness of the learning that takes place.

‘Collaborative learning demonstrably helps students learn better — more thoroughly, more deeply, more efficiently— than learning alone.’ (Bruffee, 1999, p. xii).

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice involves learning from experience. It is seen as an essential part of professional development, and is used in business, across the professions, and in the arts. According to Newman (1999, p. 11), there are a number of different ways of describing reflective practice. Some of these are:

Identifying a new possibility for action

- Thoughtfulness about action
- Recognising the discrepancy between what is and what should be.
- Reflection as reconstructing experience, the end of which is the identification of a new possibility for action.

Reflective journal writing

Reflective practice usually involves the keeping of a journal in which thoughts about particular learning contexts are recorded. Such journals may be private or online.

A student may write on particular aspects of their learning: significant classes they have attended, intellectual and emotional responses to the material they are working with, the effectiveness of their learning and study skills, or other topics related to their learning experience.

The focus of such a journal, for students, is knowledge of oneself as a learner. However, teachers, health professionals, business people and artists also use reflective journals as a means of coming to understand their methods of working. In the process they develop ways to improve their practice.



Reflective practice is a creative approach to professional development

Reflective practice is a creative approach to professional development.

Student mentors who decide to use a journal to record their reflections on their work will find it a valuable way to develop their skills as mentors. It is particularly

useful to write up a session. For example, you could reflect on the following:

- What worked well in the session?
- What was the overall mood?
- Where did you spend most of your time? Where did the students need the most attention?
- Who talked more—you or the students?
- Based on this session, what plans do you have for future sessions?

The D – I – E – P formula

When writing a reflective journal entry, it is useful to follow the formula D-I-E-P:

- Describe what happened
- Interpret the events - explain the meaning the events have for you
- Evaluate what was observed - the positives and negatives
- Plan how this information will be useful to you - what change does it lead to



Activity 8

Reflect on your mentor experience

- Think about your experiences so far as a mentor.
- Describe events / experiences. Interpret them. Evaluate them. Plan how you might use this experience as a stepping stone for a 'new possibility for action'.
- Make this writing the start of your mentor journal.

Summary

Whether you simply use the time on your tram journey home to reflect on your work as a mentor, or you write regularly in a journal, you'll find that reflective practice one of the most rewarding ways of learning from the work you are engaged in. It helps you to see new possibilities for action.

Reflective practice involves learning from your experience. It is a thoughtful, critical, evaluative activity aimed at self knowledge and the improving of one's ways of working.

Appendix

Where to go? Services for students

As a mentor you won't be able to solve all of your mentee's problems. Even if you could, it's not your responsibility to help them in areas which are outside the work you do in your program or outside other mentor roles you are taking on.

But you might find it useful to suggest or refer students to any of the many support services offered at RMIT. Most of these services are grouped together under the term 'Student Services'.

Here are some examples of things a mentee might ask you that could be referred.

Where could you refer students who have the following questions?

- How can I improve my English writing skills?
- I'd like to join a sports team.
- Are there any prayer groups on campus?
- I need to get a doctor's certificate.
- Is there anyone who can check my CV?
- I'm feeling very depressed and unmotivated. What can I do?

Career development and learning

- Career Development and Employment
- Disability Liaison Unit (DLU)
- Education Abroad
- Orientation
- RMIT LEAD
- Study and Learning Centre (SLC)

Get involved

- Orientation
- RMIT LEAD
- RMIT Union (Arts, Sport and Recreation)
- Student Union (Activities, Advocacy and Representation, Clubs and Collectives)

Health and wellbeing

- Chaplaincy and Spiritual Centre
- Counseling
- Health Service
- Student Accident Insurance

Support

- Childcare
- Financial Advice
- Housing Advisory Service
- International Student Information and Support (ISIS)
- Ngarara Willim Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students
- Scholarships

This list of services comes from the RMIT website under 'Current students' <http://www.rmit.edu.au/students> (click on services for students) but is also available in the student diary.

Most other administrative issues can be dealt with at The Hub on each campus. Academic issues should be referred to course co-ordinators.

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