

Some Insights into a Peer Mentoring Programme

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Introduction

This paper describes a small scale study of students' expectations with the peer mentoring programme coordinated by the Student Learning Support (SLS) section of the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) at the University of the South Pacific (USP). USP is regionally owned by 12 member countries from the South Pacific and therefore attracts students from diverse cultures and learning backgrounds.

In 2014, FBE SLS shifted its style of mentoring which used to involve tutoring and coaching to discipline focused study strategies through the implementation of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). The main intention for the change was to incorporate student and discipline centered learning approaches applied by PASS, which would subsequently enable students to self-direct their learning.

The impetus for the study was twofold. First and foremost, it would enable delineating how students, hereafter mentees, were responding to PASS strategies which they were exposed to through the SLS mentoring programme. Another, the study would identify factors that mentees found conducive to the mentoring environment, so that it could then be employed to further enhance the programme for SLS, and eventually allow a full implementation of PASS.

The Study Context

In 2006 the mentoring programme was established in the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at USP. Prior to the start of each semester, the newly recruited and continuing mentors underwent a day's training on the roles and responsibilities of the mentor and the objectives of the programme. Mentor recruitment involved an initial short listing on the basis of high grade point averages and successful interviews.

A published brochure (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, 2009a) on the Mentoring Programme informed on the following activities that would be undertaken during a session:

Assistance is provided in terms of

1. unpacking assignment question
2. looking at tutorial questions
3. understanding lecture notes
4. doing research for assignment
5. proper referencing
6. exam preparation – past year papers

The Mentoring programme did emphasise that the mentors were not to tutor their mentees (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, 2009b), but it was not clarified how group strategies would be utilised to achieve the objectives laid out in the brochure.

According to the Mentor Training Workshop booklet (Vakamocea, 2009b, p. 8), a mentor possessed the following attributes: guide, friend, listener, coach and responsive adult. As such, the programme alluded to the mentor as an experienced 'study buddy'. Furthermore, the Term and Conditions for Practice provided the following guideline on how a mentor in CELT would mentor:

Aim to spend some time with each mentee on one on one interaction.

Do not only do things in groups.

It is generally inappropriate to include your friends in your time with your mentee(s).

Your mentee(s) should be receiving your full attention.

The of your time should be with them, although it is OK to spend time with other pairs or doing group activities occasionally.

Avoid spending time with one or more other pairs if it is not beneficial for the building of a strong relationship between you and your mentee.

Your mentee is here to build a relationship with you not with his or her friends (Vakamocea, 2009b, p. 2).

This description suggests that the mentor and mentee relationship was a one on one learning support platform and was expected to be nurtured even during a group session. As a result, the traditional concept of a mentor, someone who is more experienced (Ragins, 2009, p. 240), was established and continued. A CELT mentor was projected as someone who would facilitate the academic and social well-being of mentees.

In 2009, CELT was decentralised into the three faculties at USP enabling the management of each of CELT's programmes to be more faculty oriented. CELT was rebranded as Student Learning Support (SLS). Nevertheless the physical importation of SLS into each faculty did not occur until late 2011. Each faculty SLS then recruited and trained their respective mentors under a new banner, namely the Senior Peer Mentoring Programme (SPMP) and the mentors were formally referred to as Peer Mentors. There are now three SPMPs, one in each faculty.

In early 2013, Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) training was initiated for all SLS staff at the Australian National Centre for PASS, University of Wollongong. This was to add the supplemental instruction platform that PASS involved, and consequently have an internationally recognised programme operating alongside SPMP. Furthermore, application of PASS would standardise all SLS SPMP operations at USP.

PASS is distinct from traditional mentor led sessions in that it nurtures self-directed learning approaches. It aims to provide a non-remedial approach involving collaborative learning activities that give more autonomy to learners in deciding how to proceed with their learning. As such it moves away from using the term 'mentor' to 'PASS Leader' since it tends to exude the conventional hierarchical role of the mentor. In order for a PASS session to be effective, participants need to be prepared and have to participate in directing the course of the session. Group consensus is used to direct the session and this can at times result in open-ended sessions and

unconfirmed solutions. In such situations, mentees are asked to consult with course tutors and lecturers. These strategies make PASS very different from the SPMP in FBE. The details of their distinction are tabled below.

Table 1
Some distinctions between SPMP & PASS

SPMP	PASS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Mentor is a guide and friend who provides academic and social support. Session may simulate a tutorial. • Mentor training does not address facilitation of academic content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS leader redirects mentees to information source. There is no re-teaching or introduction of new content. • PASS leader receives training on how to avoid re-teaching.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative learning techniques applied → solutions confirmed during session by the Peer Mentor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative learning techniques used → solutions confirmed through consensus from mentees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Mentor not expected to attend lectures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS leader attends some lectures, and meets regularly with lecturers and tutors; network with academic staff and SLS established
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No formal observations conducted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS leader and session observed and evaluated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentees fill out programme evaluation at end of semester and feedback provided to School staff, HODs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular evaluation of programme conducted and feedback provided to School staff, HODs
	Source (Peer Assisted Study Sessions, 2012)

FBE SLS gradually implemented PASS first by informing faculty staff, and also conducted a workshop for one of the schools. PASS was rolled out to one first year course in the faculty, however, the title PASS was not used. This was mainly to trial PASS strategies within the existing SPMP, and assess how mentees would respond to PASS. Mentoring for other courses continued according to usual practice. In 2014, all new and existing mentors were trained according to PASS requirements and two first year courses were run as PASS courses. For quality measures and a requisite of PASS, mentors were observed formally and discussions with mentors ensued as per the stipulated criteria set by PASS. FBE SLS still uses the title Senior Peer Mentoring (SPMP) programme.

With the implementation of PASS strategies, a huge shift in the learning approach was realized. This became evident when some mentees verbally commented that their mentor was not teaching them properly. Other remarks were:

The mentor should come prepared... and not tell to look for information in the book ...

The mentor always tells us to discuss with each other...she doesn't tell us the answer ... other students don't know ... that's why we come for mentoring.

The mentor is like the lecturer ... only different ... I can't go to the lecturer. The mentor should tell us the answer

Evidently, these comments indicated that some mentees' expectations of the sessions were different from what they were experiencing during the sessions.

In order to elicit a general overview of how FBE mentees viewed their sessions, a small scale online survey was conducted. The study queried whether mentees found their sessions satisfactory and their reasons for their response. This paper presents findings from the survey.

Literature Review

Defining Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring programmes fit within the social development theory framework (Vygotsky, 1978) which state that learning occurs through interactions people have with other more knowledgeable people. For students, this translates to their peers, teachers and other experts who engage in cooperative dialogue (Doolittle, 1995) with them to support them in internalising new information.

The term cooperative learning has been used quite interchangeably with another similar group learning terminology, namely, collaborative learning. While essentially, both terms denote group learning, literature (Bruffee, 1995; Panitz, 1999) distinguishes the two with regards to the purpose for group interaction. According to Bruffee (1995), cooperative learning maintains the conventional relation of teacher and student and there is a fixed instructional outcome of each session. Group activities are supervised and managed by an authority figure that is viewed as the 'more knowledgeable other'. Group interaction tends to focus on learning foundational knowledge. Collaborative learning situations, on the other hand, reposition the status quo present in cooperative learning environments. The learners are empowered to engage in critical thinking and debate. As such collaborative learning is more student-centered where "... students provide input into what the class does and how it does it. This includes decisions about what to study, how to study it, ... which group activities to do, how assessment is conducted, and what rewards and punishments – if any – are given" (Panitz, 1999, p. 11). Bruffee (1995), states that cooperative learning strategies are better for foundational knowledge, whereas collaborative learning is more appropriate for higher level interaction.

Peer Mentoring programmes in tertiary learning environments have traditionally reflected a 'hierarchical relationship' between the mentor and their mentees (Fullerton 1996, p. 7). This perception persists mainly due to the fact that a mentor is someone who is 'looked upon' for guidance and support despite the mentor's role encompassing attributes of a 'trusted friend' (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 127). Tarrion and Leonard (2007) show that peer mentoring relations are usually based on

criteria such as maturity of age, experience, academic achievement, high self-motivation which therefore make a peer mentor a popular academic support agent. Considering that there are various strands of mentoring relationships and expectations, it is essential to delineate what they are so as to better understand how each type operates. Townsend et al (2011) categorise mentoring into three types of relationships namely; academic mentoring, peer mentoring and peer tutoring. While academic mentoring involves a faculty staff providing academic and emotional support to mentees (students), peer mentoring and peer tutoring involve student to student engagement. Their distinction for the two clearly describes that peer tutoring comprises 'teaching' students either in a one on one or in small group settings; whereas peer mentoring does not provide such tutoring but shares academic learning experiences and provides academic support during the peer mentoring context. These illustrations tend to reinforce the peer mentor's hierarchical role of someone who has more experience and thus is able to provide guidance.

The Pacific Mentoring Context

Chu (2012) describes that mentoring is a process which builds strong relationships that are necessary for positive development in Pacific students. This development involves a sense of closeness between the mentor and protégée, sense of empowerment for the protégée and opportunity for the protégée to become a mentor as well. Chu (2012, p. 131) maintains that mentoring is about '...creating relationships of influence' and this involves recognising, understanding and empathising with the needs of mentees. Chu's sentiments echo Thaman's (1996) call for greater sensitivity in Pacific students' learning experiences and learning contexts. Thaman (2009) explains that a learning environment is culturally democratic when it recognises the need of the learner to identify with his/ her culture and language and subsequently use that culture to co-construct meaning. In doing so, the students' worldviews are considered and used as a tool to understand new information. Thaman (2009, p. 2) argues that many Pacific Island nation curriculums do not encourage such learning environments and consequently gaps between how the learner has been taught by his/ her cultures and how they are expected to learn in formal (western) classrooms occur. For instance, Phan (2008, p. 372) describes that Pacific students' approaches to learning are shaped by their primary and secondary schools. Two illustrations are forwarded to describe students' pre-tertiary learning contexts. The first demonstrates strong reliance on information provided by teachers.

Since Pacific classrooms are 'teacher directed and controlled' (Taufe'ulungaki, 2003, p. 31), there is a prevalence of 'spoon-feeding' (Landbeck & Mugler, 1994, p. 287; Benson, 1995, p. 12; Latu & Young, 2004, p. 4). As a consequence, students tend to expect the same when in tertiary learning environments. Students at USP have themselves reported expecting to be provided with detailed notes by their lecturers, so that they do not have to refer to their readings and are not detracted from irrelevant content (Landbeck, 1997, p. 26). The second illustration is the strong prevalence of an exam culture. As there is considerable preoccupation with completing the requirements of the curriculum and ensuring maximum pass rate, little attention is given to how students are learning their content (Tuimaleali'ifano, 2007, p. 25). As such, students resort to rote learning and memorising (Landbeck & Mugler, 1994, p. 288; Phan & Deo, 2008), which in due course poses difficulty for them when transitioning to tertiary learning environments (Landbeck & Mugler, 1995), where

students' conceptions of learning excludes the development of higher order thinking such as problem solving and critical thinking (Landbeck, 1997, p.28).

In order to address such 'gaps', Young (1991, p. 87) explains that learners play an instrumental role in the learning process and therefore should be involved as active agents. His view that the "... learner is a pedagogical partner, rather than a pedagogical object" effectively supports Thaman's (2009) call for teachers to create culturally democratic environments where students can recourse to their own cultures to manage their learning processes. Additionally, Chu (2013, p. 9) suggests that learners' learning strengths should be taken advantage of and their learning communities need to be encouraged if successful outcomes in learning were to be achieved. As such, learners need a non-threatening environment where they are able to employ learning tools that suit them best and enable them to achieve their learning goals.

So the question that arises is why some SPMP mentees were reacting in the manner they did when their SPMP environment was enabling them opportunity to discuss and share knowledge. It is assumed that although PASS strategies were empowering mentees to self direct their own learning, they seemed challenging for some mentees which was manifested through their comments.

In order to assess whether current mentees were satisfied with their mentoring sessions, this study was undertaken. Due to the comments and attitude of some mentees (as presented earlier), it was already presumed that some level of dissatisfaction with FBE SLS peer mentoring sessions existed.

The Purpose

The study set out to identify:

- Whether current mentees were satisfied with their mentoring sessions (used PASS strategies)
- Their reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the programme
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Research Design

This study was conducted through an online survey questionnaire. While surveys are fast paced and easily conducted, their main drawback is that response rate can be low and responses may not provide an in-depth understanding of the situation at hand (Robson, 1997, p. 128). Since the aim of the study was to obtain an overall assessment of how mentees viewed the present mentoring strategies, the survey approach was employed. It was also hoped that the findings generated from this study could lead to a more extensive research on USP students' expectations from their learning environments should such a need is indicated.

The survey questionnaire was based on six questions. Questions 1, 2, 4 and 6 were closed and options were provided to curtail responses. The questions were:

1. How did you learn about the programme? [From lecturer, web mail, friend, SLS presentation]
2. How many sessions have you attended? [One/ two/ more than two]
3. If you attended less than 5 sessions, why did you discontinue with them?
4. Were you satisfied with the sessions? [Yes/ No]
5. Is there anything you would like the sessions to address more specifically – what is it?

6. Would you recommend the programme to your friends? [Yes/ No]

The questionnaire was devised using the usual mentoring programme evaluation questions through the online Google Docs mechanism and the link was sent out to 489 mentees during the final two weeks of semester 2, 2014 through email. A follow up email was sent with the hope of obtaining maximum response rate. The email also contained a note explaining that all responses would be contained within USP's ethical conventions and that the students had the right not to respond. The mentees are from the Pacific Island countries which constitute the various member countries of USP.

Altogether 59 mentees responded to the survey which was considered final after a response period of 5 weeks. 60% of respondents are of itaukei descent from Fiji, whereas the remaining 40% represent Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa and Tonga. The Google Docs platform enabled the presentation of data for Questions 1, 2, 4 and 6 into simple statistical charts and these are provided in the results section.

Questions 3 and 5 were open ended and so their responses needed separate analysis. The responses were coded accordingly and thematically categorised. For instance, responses from Question 3 were listed under study commitments and personal commitments.

The response items for Question 5 were categorised as reasons for satisfactory and unsatisfactory expectations. Comments were mostly focused on techniques used during session and common factors that reflected mentees' perceptions of session, and mentees' perception of mentors' role.

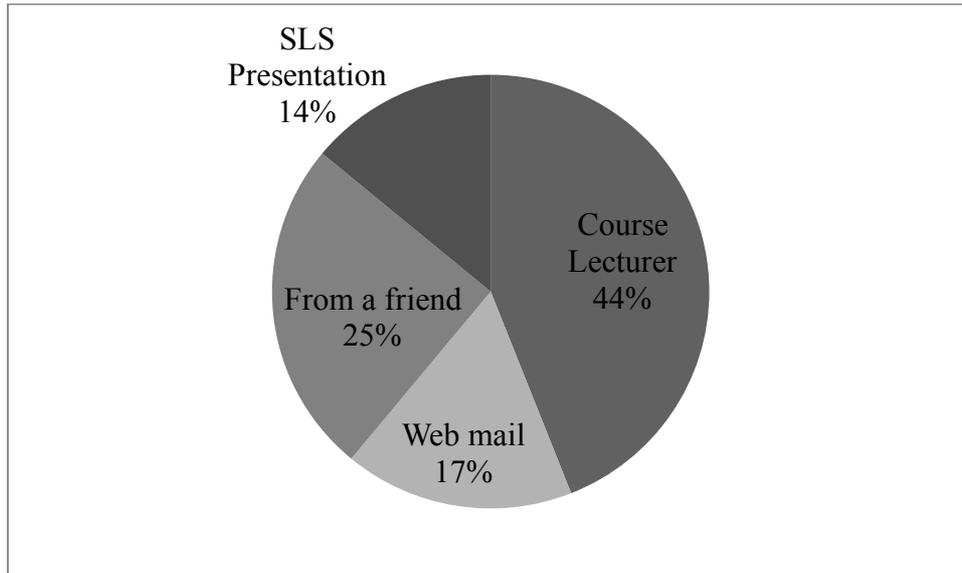
Results

Responses to the survey are presented accordingly.

Programme Information

The question provided four options to how the mentee had learnt about the programme: from a friend, from the Student Learning Support presentation, from the course lecturer, from webmail. Majority students indicated that information regarding the SPMP was forwarded by their lecturer.

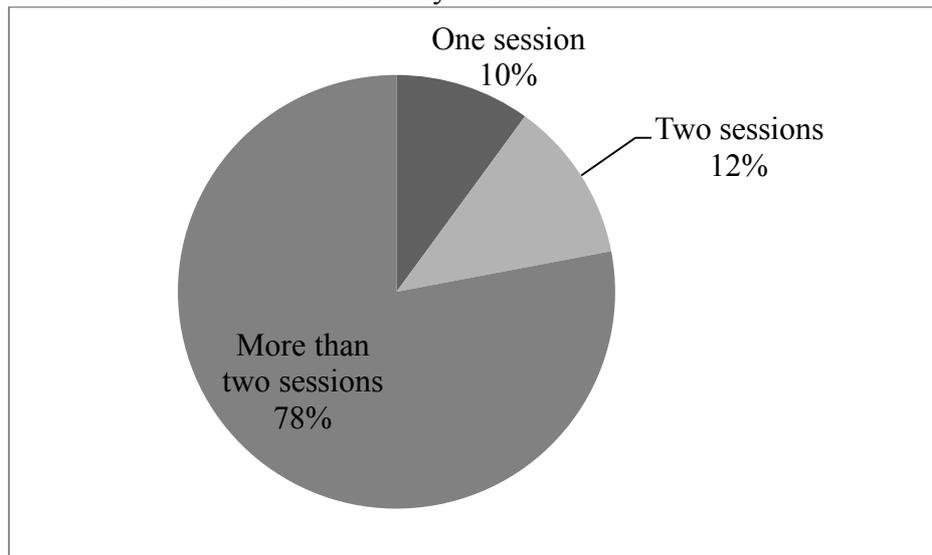
Figure 1. Source of information about SPMP



Attendance

Majority mentees stated attending more than 2 sessions.

Figure 2. Number of sessions attended by Mentees.



However with reference to question 3, it was found that 28 respondents had attended less than 5 sessions. Both study and personal commitments constrained mentees from attending sessions. Assignments, learning about the programme late in the semester, poor mid-semester results leading to late start, work and family responsibilities were some of the reasons attributed to the low attendance rate. Other factors such as poor time management, mentor absence, not knowing about mentoring times, and dissatisfaction with mentoring were also identified as reasons for discontinuing with the programme.

Session Impact and specific changes

While a large number of mentees reported that they were satisfied with their sessions, and a 100% positive response rate was achieved from mentees stating that they would recommend the programme to their friends, results demonstrated various reasons mentees provided for sessions being satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

Two common themes that emerged were mentees' perceptions of mentors' role and mentees' perceptions of how the session should be conducted.

The following table lists mentees' responses for satisfactory sessions. It delineates aspects that mentees considered beneficial and becoming of mentoring sessions.

Table 2
Reasons why sessions were satisfactory

Mentors' Role	During the Sessions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided detailed explanations • Covered assignment requirements and assisted with assignments • Helped prepare for tests & exams • Provides study tips/ hints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test & exam preparation conducted • Addressed tutorial questions • Students did not cooperate

The table below lists mentees' reasons why the sessions did not meet with mentee's expectations.

Table 3
Reasons why sessions were unsatisfactory

Mentors' Role	How sessions should be conducted
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not teach and coach on difficult content • Did not simplify content • Did not explain • Did not clarify queries • Did not focus on tests and exams • Did not cover tutorial questions • Did not provide additional examples • Undermine mentees' capability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on assignment requirements • Address mentees' questions • Revise for tests and exams • Keep to par with course tutorial schedules • Allocate more time for coverage

Discussion

This study examined mentees' feedback on the FBE SPMP and whether the mentoring sessions were meeting their expectations.

Awareness of SPMP and attendance

The SPMP seemed to be viewed quite favourably by lecturers as reports showed student awareness of the programme was through their lecturers more than any other source. Furthermore, attendance was reported to be high but heavy course schedules and other personal commitments were factors affecting attendance.

Satisfactory aspect of SPMP

Generally, the response rate demonstrated that mentees were quite satisfied with their sessions; it was, however, evident from their specific comments that there was some dissatisfaction with the manner in which the sessions were being conducted. Since the question was open-ended, it generated responses on a range of latent issues such as noise levels, insufficient time and clashes between mentoring schedules, other commitments, and mentor absence contributing to dissatisfaction with the sessions. Nevertheless, majority comments targeted perceived mentor roles and preferred expectations from the sessions. The comments revealed disparity between mentees' expectations and the actual practices of SPMP.

To begin with, with the prevalence of teacher centered approaches that best describe learning prior to participating in SPMP, an obvious shift in learning style was realized when mentees were exposed to PASS strategies. Mentors prepared lessons and activities and mentees were expected to work collaboratively in order to find solutions. Mentor interventions were solely to 'manage' and facilitate direction, and not provide any instructional feedback. The method proved problematic for those expecting their Peer Mentors to provide coaching support.

A few justifications are forwarded for this attitude. Firstly, mentees stated that the one hour sessions were not sufficient to address questions brought in by them. Comments seem to imply that students were very dependent on their sessions for support with assignments and tests and if these were not being addressed, the sessions were inadequately fulfilling their purpose.

The second justification addressed mentor's role. Clearly, mentees do not perceive the mentor as a facilitator. Comments indicate that mentees view the mentor as someone who will demonstrate how to work on the activity, and situations that directly question, put them on the spot or expect them to be prepared to discuss in the presence of other mentees was considered upsetting and even offensive. The following comment clearly illustrates this:

I attend less than 5 sessions because the mentor did not teach the way I expected. He always try test each single person in front of others how well you understand. But he should understand some of us just went there to learn. That teaching approach does not help at all for some of us who are too shy. So as result I discontinue attending.

Mentors are expected to elaborate, address specific queries brought in by mentees and even assist with preparing for tests and exams. One comment clearly showed that the sessions were viewed as additional tutorials:

Please ensure that mentors are covering something that is newly taught and up to par with the weekly lecturers.

SPMP sessions focus on content that are a week behind of their courses to prevent possible overlaps with tutorial activities and to provide review sessions. Responses on the sessions resulted in manifesting actual practices occurring during the sessions. Comments stating that sessions were satisfactory revealed that there were explanations, clarifications of questions and extensive preparation for tests and exams. It was also stated that at times other students were not cooperative. There are two plausible situations at work here. One, since mentees were not contributing effectively towards the activities (this had also been reported in one of the comments), their mentors may have been resorting to explaining and clarifying. This may have become a habitual practice in some sessions. The second situation could be that there was considerable dialogue and engagement which had led to the satisfactory remarks about the sessions.

Responses on why sessions proved unsatisfactory were paradoxical to reasons for why sessions were satisfactory. Comments reflected that if strategies were not teacher centered, they were not considered to be meeting mentees' expectations of mentor's role and mentoring sessions. Mentees further commented that mentors were not or were inadequately trained to conduct sessions. These attitudes were noted through the following comments:

The mentors should be more knowledgeable to put the subjects in simple aspects in which the mentees can be able to understand and that the mentors should [not] undermine the mentees capabilities.

Mentors should at least get some teaching tips before teaching their peers.

Most of them have no teaching background, failed to perform.

While it was not clarified what the term teaching in these comments alluded to, it was evident that mentor not simplifying content or pushing questions back to students was viewed as 'poor teaching' and lacking content knowledge respectively. On the contrary, a comment indicated that some students did desire opportunity to discuss their opinions.

They should allow student to share their views and they will judge or guide them instead of them telling or teaching everything.

Economides (2008) explains that collaborative learning environments tend to have learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, and with a multitude of learning styles and preferences. This is clearly demonstrated in the FBE SPMP context where some mentees were feeling undermined and offended when expected to contribute to discussion while others welcomed opportunities to actively participate during the sessions. Economidas (2008) further suggests that collaborative learning contexts need to be 'tailor made' to suit the needs of their learners which in the case of SPMP seems to be lacking, hence the unsatisfactory comments.

The results reveal students' tendency to rely on teacher support in learning. Clearly, it is a habit that mostly likely has been moulded by pre-tertiary learning approaches and which students are finding hard to move away from. Evidently, SLS needs to orientate students into its mentoring programme with considerable sensitivity to this practice.

The sessions need to encourage positive growth which Chu (2012) states is a necessary outcome for Pacific mentees. This will involve incorporating Pacific values (Chu, 2013) and working together on the outcomes and a workable progression of each session. Mentees need to be included in dialogue where they are described the learning approach that will be used during their sessions and how it is likely to benefit them. They should be included in their own learning process rather than made to feel that some new approach has been forced upon them without any prior notification or engagement. PASS is circumscribed by discipline specific learning strategies which aim to make learners independent. This independence needs to be gradually inculcated which in turn should allow discussion between the mentor/ PASS leader and mentee about how a session is expected to proceed, what its learning outcomes are, and which strategies will be used. Since attendance in the programme is voluntary, the initial dialogue should be made a necessary requirement for all sessions so that new methods do not surprise students and new students do not feel 'out of place'.

With due respect to these suggestions, FBE SPMP can be enhanced by considering a juxtaposition of mentees' preferred expectations and the requirements of PASS. This will require dialogue on how to acclimatize mentees to PASS strategies, and how to engage them throughout the sessions (Ross, 2009, p. 6) so that they do not feel undermined or out of depth.

This study is relatively small. The number of respondents (59/ 489) represents 12% of commentary on the programme, however, the findings are consistent with issues and concerns that have been already outlined in existing literature on Pacific learners' learning preferences, and thus should not be considered negligible.

To recap, there is a conflicting interplay of learners' preferences and expectations with what FBE SPMP offers through its mentoring strategies. Responses have indicated that not all sessions are operating as per requirement. They are in fact slipping into traditional peer tutoring practices. Concurrently, sessions that are running as per requirement are preferred by some mentees. This exhibits that not all mentees' experiences in their sessions are unsatisfactory, and thus need thorough reassessment so as to adequately provide a conducive learning environment.

A reconfiguration and customization of PASS strategies to suit existing SPMP is needed if the programme is to foster positive expectations from its mentees.

Conclusion

The current Senior Peer Mentoring programme adopted PASS mainly to shift its tutoring and coaching practices to self-directed learning approaches circumscribed by PASS. After a year's implementation, FBE SLS set out to investigate whether mentees were satisfied with two aspects of the programme, namely, the mentor's role and the mentoring session.

The results from the study revealed that the programme is viewed as an additional learning platform for students, and is usually recommended to students by their lecturers. It was also discovered that although an overall satisfaction was predominant, there were conflicting expectations about mentor's roles and mentoring sessions. While some mentees favoured opportunities to engage with each other during their sessions, other mentees preferred to be tutored by their mentor. The former reaction was clearly positive and implied that there was preference for learning autonomy. The second feedback, however, indicated that there was an emphatic need to address the role of the mentor and the manner in which the session would be conducted to enable all mentees to ease into a more independent learning context and its expectations.

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