Reflective Narratives of Online Peer-Mentoring During Pandemic Times

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Introduction

Engaging students and building connections during their first-year college transition is key to persistence and a sense of belonging (Diaz et al, 2021; Goodlad et al., 2019). Peer mentoring can be instrumental in this process (Diaz et al., forthcoming; Plaskett, et al., 2018; Phinney et al., 2011). Since the start of the pandemic, however, the higher education landscape has changed, and so has peer mentoring. Learning has moved primarily online. Enrollment has fallen sharply, particularly at a minority-serving public institution (NSC, 2020). The pandemic has also exacerbated pre-existing challenges for many first-year students at public institutions, and new ones emerged related to the online college experience (Diaz et al, forthcoming). Taken together, these factors impacted our approach to engaging and connecting with students. This poster presentation will share reflexive narratives from our experiences in the online peer mentoring of first-year students at City Tech during pandemic times. We present both challenges and opportunities for future directions in online peer mentoring.

Narrative Approach

Diverse disciplines such as psychology, nursing, and education have taken a turn toward narrative. Writing and reading stories can be transformative because the process involves cognitive and affective investment that can lead to the narrator's self-development (Granic et al., 2020; Polkinghorne, 1988; Wertsch, 1991). Story construction, reflexivity and meaning making from one's experiences, cultural interpretations of the complexities of our social fabric can also be empowering, especially for those whose truths are seldom told or included in the public discourse (Diaz & Shepard, 2019). The relational process of storytelling can help to uncover hidden stories, increasing the collective awareness of shared experiences and broader social dilemmas. Morrison (2017) writes that storytelling is significant as a decolonized pedagogical practice that can support students of color in articulating and sharing their own experiences building upon their indigenous knowledge. Bentmayor (2008) writes "storytelling is an assets-based pedagogy where students can bring their own cultural knowledge and experience to the fore, including their skills and comfort with technology, to transform their thinking and empower themselves."

Stories and Analysis

We have written and analysed four narratives of our experiences in online peer mentoring of first-year students in the Human Services at City Tech during pandemic times. We are four peer-mentors from the CREAR Futuros Peer Mentoring Program, and majoring in the human services, and a professor of human services. Our peer mentoring experiences range from half a semester as two new peer-mentors, to 2.5 semesters as two returning peer-mentors, and as a faculty liaison of the peer mentoring program for six academic years. We began with an initial open-ended writing prompt : "**What has online-peer mentoring been like during the pandemic?**" We collected, read, reviewed and discussed each other's reflexive narratives. This process sparked additional questions: *"What are the advantages of online peer mentoring? What are the challenges of online peer mentoring?* and *"How are first-year students experiencing their first semester at college?"*

What Has Online Peer-Mentoring Been Like During the Pandemic? Preliminary Themes

Advantages of Peer Mentoring Online

o Flexibility and Convenience for Peer Mentor : Working from Home

o Flexibility and Accessibility Student Mentees

o Multiple Modalities for Interacting and Supporting Student Mentees

o Opportunity to Increase Peer Mentors Technical Skills

o Meeting with More Students Offers Opportunity to Identify Their Needs

Challenges of Peer Mentoring Online

o Peer Mentors Need Online Technical Skills for Varying Digital Platforms

o Students have different online interaction norms i.e. do not turn on camera when meeting on zoom

o Difficult to engage students

o New students don't have campus experience or in-person college experiences

o Difficult to develop trust and rapport and implement human services skills

o Difficult to set boundaries between work, classes, and home

o "Zoom Fatigue"

o Challenge creating fun and engaging activities for group meetings with students.

o Miss face-to-face interactions

New Students Are Seeking Support For...

o Experiencing issues with anxiety and depression

o Feeling lost in their classes

o Difficulty understanding assignments

o Difficulty with online teaching platforms

o Confusion around access and use of academic advisement

o Referral for tutoring Supports

o Referral counseling and student support services

o Referral for writing center supports

o Missing on-campus experience and interactions with peers

Implications and Conclusions

Our narratives revealed that online peer mentoring presents a number of advantages and challenges in connecting with first year students. Online mentoring allows us more flexibility in meeting with students and accommodating schedules, and in balancing our own work, school, life needs. This flexibility can mean interacting with more students that would otherwise have difficulty with scheduling in-person on campus meetings. We have also gained technical skills needed to mentor online, such as learning to use multiple online platforms, organizing tools, and online workshop facilitation. However, our reflections also revealed challenges of online mentoring. Building connections with student has been complicated without shared norms for online interactions.

For a number of reasons students do not turn on cameras during individual zoom sessions, making it difficult to pick up on nonverbal cues and apply engagement skills used in face-to-face interactions. One consequence is that we do not obtain adequate information necessary for meeting student needs. The lack of visual connection can also be fatiguing and discouraging for the peer-mentor. Furthermore, during group meetings, students might disengage from participation, attend to other things while online, or experience zoom fatigue as well. Building rapport and connections among students, which is essential to the transition to college and student sense of belonging, can be difficult to foster online. In spite of the complexities of online peer mentoring, students share with us that they are experiencing multiple concerns: mental health and social issues, academic and technical needs, feeling disconnected from others and from the college experience, and an overall sense of feeling lost in the process. Developing best practices for online engagement and community building among students is critical as students virtually transition to college and continue to learn in this modality.

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