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Not quite an academic, not quite professional services: supporting students’ wellbeing and development in the ‘third space’ as a peer-mentoring coordinator

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Abstract

Peer-to-peer support schemes, where more experienced students support other students, are a widely used tool in universities for supporting the student experience. Although their benefits for students are well researched, the extent of the work and pedagogical expertise required to coordinate peer schemes is not often acknowledged. This case study focuses on my experience of this and how my role in delivering personalised support to the students involved, developing and delivering teaching materials, and coordinating with staff puts me in the ‘third space’. In addition, I highlight some of the challenges in increasing recognition of this type of role in higher education and how I have addressed these in my context.

Keywords: peer mentoring; third space; professional services.

Introduction

As a student, I thought jobs at the university fell into one of two categories: academic staff and support staff. I never saw crossover in these roles until I came to work at higher education and found myself in a ‘third space’ between professional and academic spheres. As a peer-mentoring coordinator, I have been plunged back into my days of personal tutoring as a secondary school teacher. Nudging students towards the right support services, producing tailored resources for them, supporting their personal development, dealing with parents — the crossovers with my time as a personal tutor and teacher have been far-reaching. My role blends academic elements, such as the design and delivery of

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mentoring training programmes and research into the impacts of peer-led learning, alongside project-based, day-to-day tasks. This combination puts me in the ever-growing 'third space' category observed by Whitchurch (2013, p.xii).

However, despite its importance, my role and the service seem to fly under the radar internally, with staff either not knowing we exist, or not quite understanding where we sit or what we do. Whitchurch notes that with the emergence of this third space, the concept of service 'has become reorientated towards one of partnership with academic colleagues, students, and external agencies' (2013, p.xii). But you cannot grow partnerships if colleagues do not understand why and how they should work with you. Working in the third space is both incredibly rewarding and challenging. In this case study, I will highlight what my role is, why it struggles to be recognised, and how we have begun to raise awareness — and thereby acceptance and understanding — of our service.

What is peer support, why does it matter, and why is it not recognised?

The first step to understanding why this role falls between the cracks and into the third space is to explain what we mean by 'peer support'. Peer-led initiatives are wide-ranging, with no widely accepted definition of mentoring (Gunn, Lee and Steed, 2016, p.15). The terms used to define peer-to-peer activities are interchangeable depending on the institution or even within an institution. Common examples listed by Frith, May, and Pocklington are peer-assisted study sessions (PASS), peer-assisted learning (PAL), and peer mentoring (2017, p.8). These three definitions are used at Exeter, with schemes split into two broad categories and naming conventions:

1. Academic peer schemes where mentoring is delivered as structured study sessions on topics learned on a course or module. These schemes are named 'PASS' or 'PAL', such as 'MFL PAL'.
2. Pastoral peer schemes: where mentoring is delivered informally, often without structure. Mentors act as a named point of contact to mentees who can reach out for guidance on non-academic topics as part of the transition to university, such as study tips or how to navigate university services. These schemes are named 'Buddy Up' or 'Mentoring', such as 'Mature Student Peer Mentoring'.

Terminology for students involved also varies. At Exeter, students delivering peer-led activities are 'mentors', students receiving support are 'mentees', and mentors are usually in a higher year than the mentees. I therefore personally refer to 'mentoring' as both the name and nature of the support offered on one of our 'pastoral' schemes and the concept of a more experienced student using their expertise to 'mentor' a less experienced student. For the purposes of this case study, I will refer henceforth to 'mentoring' as the latter act of a student supporting another student on any type of peer-learning scheme.

Why do peer-led activities such as PAL and Buddy Up schemes matter, and what are the challenges in recognising them?

Peer-learning schemes, both academic and pastoral, are 'widely used throughout higher education' (Marshall et al., 2021, p.89) and provide a 'myriad of benefits' for students (Lyon et al., 2022, p.66), particularly around student transition and retention. Research shows that student integration for first years into the academic community is a 'primary condition' for success and that peer support 'helps students settle' into university life (Byl et al., 2015, p.1). The Higher Education Academy's last *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey highlighted key benefits for mentors and mentees: mentors reported personal and professional skill development and deeper subject learning; mentees experienced reduced anxiety around transitioning to HE and an improved sense of belonging and academic confidence (Keenan, 2014, p.5).

Despite this, peer-to-peer support is 'an often overlooked yet invaluable' aspect of the academic experience (Lyon et al., 2022, p.65). In their study on how universities recognise student volunteering roles, Resch, Knapp, and Schrittesser found some lecturers were 'not aware' that student-led mentoring exists and 'as a consequence, they do not attach meaning to it' (2021, p.200). Staff support for a peer-learning scheme is crucial, not only because it signals to the institution and students that they deem a scheme important, but also because of the role staff play in its success. As highlighted by Colvin and Ashman, 'successful' peer mentoring is 'the result of relationships among students, mentors, and instructors: it does not happen in a vacuum' (2010, p.132). This may be in part because student turnover means that the only constant in a peer scheme is often the member(s) of staff associated with it. However, staff also provide the institutional framework and resources which students, both as mentors and mentees, need for the scheme to thrive.

'Much is attributed' to peer schemes with 'great benefits expected', but 'altruistic and well-intended mentoring programs devoid of a substantive framework' are 'nothing more than throwing money at a problem or hoping that something might stick' (Nora and Crisp, 2007, p.338). Indeed, the lack of consensus as to what peer mentoring is can lead to misinterpretation. Where such misunderstandings occur, its value can be easily undermined by seeing it as insubstantial. Peer mentoring can be 'positioned as one strategy to assist faculty and administrators in meeting institutional goals', particularly where universities are 'faced with limited funding' (Lyon et al., 2022, p.68). Reid therefore highlights that 'the presence of peer mentors often testifies to the insufficient resources of a composition program as much as it represents an affirmative commitment to the benefits of peer mentoring' (2008, p.54).

Such issues are not aided by how difficult proving the correlation−causation impact of peer-support initiatives can be, often an essential indicator of 'worth'. Although peer support has been 'widely used' within HE to 'enhance student success and retention', Andreanoff acknowledges that much of the evidence to measure its impact has 'relied on anecdotal, self-reported evidence from the participants' (2016, p.1). A combination of all these factors can therefore lead to a general lack of awareness or understanding of peer support and why it — and roles like mine — matter.

What is my role and where does it sit?

My team coordinates our institution's various schemes, which are run by either staff or students within that discipline with support from our central team or by us. On the surface, this could make our central roles appear administrative. But even without running three of our own schemes (which I will come to), supporting staff and student programme organisers require an in-depth knowledge of:

- The academic and personal challenges facing each student and discipline.
- University strategy, including our Education Strategy and Access and Participation Plan.
- Services to signpost to and how to do it effectively.
- Techniques for supporting student mental health and wellbeing.

- The university structure and how departments work across disciplines.

The first point is crucial so that we can tailor what we offer a discipline's mentors and mentees accordingly, not only in terms of pastoral support, but also in pedagogical resources. Our team designs and leads the training for all mentors, as well as producing downloadable resources which they can use or adapt in their mentoring. This requires pedagogical knowledge of mentoring, coaching, wellbeing, and academic skills, alongside an in-depth knowledge of inclusive practice and widening participation, particularly in ensuring accessibility and versatility for the different needs of each scheme and student. The peer-mentor training itself must clearly outline the role and skills it requires to ensure mentors, who are still students themselves, are ready to be matched with mentees, and that we can identify anyone who may need additional support to fulfil their mentoring duties and offer this.

While we collaborate with programme organisers (PPOs) to help them deliver their schemes on a day-to-day basis, we create the central procedures and systems, part of the 'substantive framework' which Nora and Crisp highlighted as essential. This includes an automated mentor and mentee approval system. We create application forms which, once filled in by a student, trigger an 'approval' request to the PPO, leading the scheme to approve or decline (e.g. if a student is not eligible to join the scheme or their application is not in line with the scheme's aims). Once approved, their details are automatically entered into a spreadsheet where PPOs can see who is enrolled on their peer scheme and decide the next steps. Approved mentors are automatically invited to complete their mentor training, another of our offerings as part of this 'substantive framework'.

Furthermore, we centrally coordinate mentor benefits and development, and provide organisational and pedagogical expertise to these students and the staff organising them. In recent years, we have supported mentors in writing and submitting applications for Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA). This has taken us beyond the previous realms of personal and professional development that we already provided to mentors through the training and tasks we ask mentors to complete. It also requires us to be proficient in the requirements of these applications to offer the necessary application support: for example, I undertake observations of student mentoring, providing

formal written and verbal feedback (which is used as part of a mentor's reflections in their application).

All this can be time-consuming, especially if you are a staff member coordinating peer mentoring for the first time and are new to how to manage it and to the pedagogical knowledge needed. I have the time to dedicate to this role and the expertise in peer mentoring that academics, who are running peer schemes voluntarily, do not. For this reason, academics often choose to align their schemes with our team. Doing so leads to more cohesive scheme delivery, because our systems have been developed through lived experience and research and therefore work well. Academics who set up schemes without us can find that the workload becomes too much without such pre-established systems, especially when learning how to manage a scheme through 'trial and error', not knowing what works. This element demonstrates how my role transcends into the 'third space'. I have had to become a pedagogical expert in delivering different types of peer schemes for different types of students and disciplines, so that I in turn can pass this knowledge on to staff and develop cohesive systems. I regularly attend conferences and contribute to research in peer-learning activities, making me an expert in my field as academics are in theirs.

It is not just staff we support in this or who benefit from this expertise. We offer similar development opportunities and pastoral support to student programme organisers, either leading schemes on their own or in collaboration with staff, who I am in regular contact with to guide them through their role. I have developed and lead their training once they are appointed, liaise with them throughout the year to ensure they are supported, and help them gain professional recognition through their own developmental workflow.

In addition to all this, I am the programme organiser of three widening-participation (WP) schemes. This role feels very humanised to me because of its similarities to my personal tutoring experience as a secondary school teacher. On these pastoral schemes, we match mentors and mentees based on experiences; these students have therefore provided me with very personal information about their lives, trusting me to find them an appropriate match. As I would with an individual learning plan (ILP), I have studied these very closely, and feel I know each of these students on a very personal level. I interact with each mentor individually to support them through the process, beyond what I already do in my

central coordination role. This programme organiser role has therefore centred on relationship formation, growth, and maintenance: such elements lie 'at the heart of belonging' for students (Lemon, 2023, p.297).

Why do I mention 'belonging'? Belonging is crucial to a university achieving its aims. Universities are made up of individual students choosing to be there; if students do not feel it is right for them to be there, for whatever reason that is, they will leave or stop coming, impacting transition and retention. Breeze, Johnson, and Uytman highlight the connection between students' perceptions of 'more distant and less approachable staff' and how this can inform their concerns about their academic ability (2020, p.21), one of the factors for many students dropping out. Both my coordinator and programme organiser roles have made me one of the 'touchpoints of familiarity' for mentors and mentees, a touchpoint that 'supports their learning experiences' (Lemon, 2023, p.300) in a time where staff−student ratios can make students slip into anonymity.

This is not just about bums on seats though, this is about the experiences of real people. There is growing awareness of the need to support students' mental wellbeing. The proportion of UK undergraduates reporting mental health difficulties has tripled between 2017 and 2023, and how this varies can be extremely unequal depending on gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (Sanders, 2023, p.27). The crossover between a sense of 'belonging' and mental health is increasingly acknowledged. In their study on belonging and inclusion, WONKHE found that just 52 percent of students with 'below average mental health' agree they belong at university, compared to 85 percent whose 'mental health has improved' (2022, p.10).

We use peer support to build communities amongst the students who can feel the least 'seen' and therefore may be more vulnerable, as identified in some of these studies. A 'one-size fits all' approach to students, particularly when it comes to student communications, can overlook students who do not fit the typical demographic, such as mature students. Events running late or early in the day and advertised at short notice are not helpful — or welcoming — to a mature student parent who needs to arrange childcare. But putting a mature mentee in touch with a mature mentor who has a similar course and life experience to them, who can be more flexible in the times and way they offer support, creates a more valuable and deeper connection to the university. My peer-mentoring work

is therefore incredibly important as a way of personalising university for all students, regardless of background (Norman, 2023), at a time where student loneliness is endemic. If you count the students I am in regular personal contact with just through my schemes and through supporting student programme organisers, I am one of the main points of contact for over 350 undergraduate students (1.5% of the UG population). Once you add in all the other mentors or mentees who could reach out to us, that becomes around 1350 (nearly 6%). Yet many academics and Professional Services staff alike meeting me for the first time think I probably work with a small number of students or the support I provide is very 'informal'. Because peer support is an 'opt-in' activity and a lot is peer-led, as well as the challenges I highlighted previously, they can find it hard to visualise what I do in practice and my position as a subject-matter expert.

The work I do is therefore as highly skilled as when I taught, because it requires understanding and pedagogical knowledge of these student groups, how their experiences can differ, and ways peer support might improve that. It also requires negotiation and strategic stakeholder relationship management: I need to know and understand how all the Professional Services teams can help my students, as well as how and when to signpost. In return, it is important that these staff and my students understand my role: that I am not a personal or academic tutor but am in a position to identify a students' needs and signpost them to much-needed support.

Therein lies part of the problem. I am not a wellbeing counsellor, nor a personal tutor; I do not sit at a student-facing, Professional Services desk, but I have huge importance in the day-to-day experience of many students. I am not surprised, therefore, that students and staff are unsure how to view my role and therefore whether to value it. In her initial literature review for her AdvanceHE 'Decoding Support' project, Hubbard refers to the 'lack of recognition of support' given to students in 'informal spaces', and an 'absence of structural recognition and reward in organisations' for this support (2024, n.p.). While I am sure we would all argue that we are not doing this for reward, there is a serious need to acknowledge this support because of the benefits it brings for students in receipt of it and to retention rates. Since joining my team, my mission has been to raise awareness of the 'informal space' support that we offer so that its importance is recognised and utilised by staff and students.

What have we done to address awareness of our service and role?

My first step has been to focus on internal communications to staff, given we do not value what we do not understand. When I joined the team, we were not represented in any working groups, meaning our work was less visible; I immediately reached out to working groups to join or present our work at their meetings. Our work is closely aligned to the university's Access and Participation Plan; but as previously outlined, we have special insights into the student experience across all faculties because of the quantity and variety of student-led schemes we support. Participating in working-group discussions has therefore allowed me to share these insights and act on them to contribute to the wider university strategy, and I now sit on various working groups on behalf of our team. This exposure to other teams in similar lines of work has led to more close-knit, strategic collaborations with projects, such as compassionate communications work and discipline-wide Maths and Stats support. By becoming more embedded within higher profile portfolios, we are gaining the 'structural recognition' mentioned by Hubbard.

Furthermore, appearing at these meetings has generated better awareness of our team and what it does. I have created lightning talk videos and presentations outlining what our work is, delivering these in a question-and-answer-style format to staff. This has clarified our terminology and defined what we do, leading to improved recognition of our importance from both academics and professional services, and greater willingness to collaborate. Once staff understand who we are and what we do, it becomes easier for them to understand where we sit — which is right at the central crossover between academia and Professional Services. As a result, we are collaborating with Professional Services and academic programme organisers and bringing them together in meetings. My articulating the level and depth of our involvement in the student experience, as outlined above, has promoted us from being invited to participate in outreach days and events to helping to lead some, such as induction events and WP student-facing events. These in turn bring us to the forefront for new and prospective students who may become mentees, mentors, or student programme organisers.

As a qualified teacher, I have also sought to bring my pedagogical background into the role. In 2023, I successfully applied for AFHEA status despite being Professional Services staff, because of the growing recognition of us as educators. Because of this, I can

participate in other types of activities such as leading staff development opportunities. This allows me not only to network with aspiring educators, who may wish to become involved in peer mentoring, but has also helped with our delivery of the AFHEA application route we offer to our mentors. Offering them this option to apply for AFHEA is a fantastic recognition of their — and our — contribution to facilitating teaching and learning for students. The more we as staff are recognised as 'educators', the more the teaching and training we deliver to mentors is acknowledged.

Furthermore, this year, against my instincts, I successfully applied and presented my work as an example of 'why educational research matters' at the School of Education annual conference. Previously, I would have seen this as off-limits; but I now understand the importance of our work in contributing to research in peer-to-peer learning. In this vein, I have submitted a case study of our three WP schemes to the new report on peer learning and support in HE, which is an update on Keenan's report (2014), and am continuing to seek opportunities to highlight the pedagogical impact and importance of peer support.

Recommendations and next steps

This year, we will be capitalising on the increased institutional visibility of our schemes to work more closely with faculties in delivering their strategic priorities, such as working with them to create tailored schemes for their students. We will continue to appear at both staff and student-facing events, including conferences.

Based on my experience, some practical tips I would recommend to other 'third space' staff involved in peer learning include:

- Ensure that you have clear terminology and definitions for what peer-to-peer learning means at your institution. This allows other staff to see through the jargon and understand not only what you are delivering but the expertise needed to deliver it.
- Take advantage of opportunities to present your work and these definitions at staff and student-facing events and meetings. Doing this allows you to address misunderstandings about your work and its importance. It also allows knowledge of

your work to spread organically around the institution and become more visible (and more valued).

- Apply to present your work in the academic sphere, even if it feels unnatural. The more visibility 'third space' staff have on the HE stage, the easier it will be for others to recognise their importance.

Conclusion

We often talk about the third space in terms of challenges it brings, not benefits, but I would like this case study to be an exception. I despaired when I left teaching that there would be no way for me to be involved in shaping students' educational experiences without becoming an academic. But my current role is exactly what I was searching for without realising it existed. In institutions which seem increasingly faceless, I love being a named person that students can talk to and providing the one-to-one support that I once did in schools. I went into teaching to help students be the best version of themselves; I now get to do that every single day. It is a real honour to be able to support students in this way and I am so grateful that roles like this exist in the third space. But it is time that institutions recognised them and gave them the outward — and inward — visibility that they deserve. Hopefully the recommendations above, drawn from my own experience, might help other 'third space' staff achieve this in their contexts.

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