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Students enabling students in a Student Partnership Project: A case study emerging from the OLT Transforming Practice Project on Student Partnerships

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Abstract

This emerging initiative stemmed from an Office for Learning and Teaching Project (OLT) project, Transforming Practice Programme 2016: Student Engagement: Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning. The initiative, trialed in semester two, 2016, involved the selection and training of two experienced students to be leaders of a Closed Facebook 'students-only' community which provided advice and triaged queries to appropriate channels. The evaluative processes comprised a participatory action research methodology. Two student leaders who facilitated the Closed Facebook and four academic staff of the project were the participants. The findings demonstrate that the Closed Facebook students-only site provided a safe space, outside the formal learning/classroom environment, where student participants were able to ask and share knowledge. The informal student-for-student learning community complemented the formal structure by facilitating the opportunity for students to become 'experts' as university students as they move-through their learning journey.

*This 'Emerging Initiative' was first presented at the 2017 STARS Conference in Adelaide, Australia in July 2017 and was selected by the Conference Committee as one of the top-rated reports. The authors have kindly given their permission to have this report published in this special issue of the Journal and it has undergone a further review by the editors to confirm it aligns with the Journal format.

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Rationale

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the United Kingdom has recognised the transformative power of *students as partners* to advance teaching, learning, and curriculum in higher education (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). This is supported by international empirical research that highlights positive outcomes for both students and academics engaged in *students as partners* initiatives. The literature documents benefits for students. These include:

- increased meta-cognitive learning (Barnes, Goldring, Bestwick, & Wood, 2010; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felton, 2014);
- raised awareness of graduate attributes and employability skills;
- positively shifted traditional power dynamics between students and academics (Barnes et al., 2010);
- engaged and empowered under-represented students (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013); and
- increased student ownership for learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

There are also benefits for staff including a transformation in teaching and learning beliefs and practices and a re-conceptualisation of teaching as a collaborative process to foster learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

However, as Matthews (2016) notes, the Australian discourse of the student voice in teaching and learning and student outcomes of engagement has yet to shift from that focused on the 'doing to or doing for students' paradigm. A first step, argues Matthews, is finding the words and stories that resonate with local institutions to develop a shared understanding of the new culture of partnerships. This initiative was an attempt to provide this

opportunity and to "re-imagine student engagement" (p. 4).

Project approach

The initiative comprised part of a National OLT Transforming Practice Project, with the University of Southern Queensland's (USQ) project, funded and supported by the Office of Pro Vice Chancellor, Scholarly Information and Learning Services. A project group was established which comprised two student leaders and four academic leaders - two academics from the Academic Division and two academics from the Academic Services Division. The project team members attended a series of workshops at the University of Queensland, as well as one at the University of Technology Sydney, to enable them to plan this Project.

The initiative involved two competent, focused students working as peer leaders of a Closed Facebook students-only site supporting students in a first year education course. These student leaders engaged with their peers in the students-only Closed Facebook community to help students enhance and develop their learning skills, both in a discipline-based context and in a general study enquiry mode. The student leaders triaged relevant student queries that occurred during the student-student interactions to the appropriate resources and/or stakeholders, for example course examiners, the Learning Centre and/or Library services and resources.

The aims of the Closed Facebook site were to:

- provide a 'safe' social learning platform where students could engage with their peers;
- help students develop the academic learning skills needed for success;
- provide students with useful and successful study strategies and techniques;

- develop leadership skills in student leaders;
- provide feedback to academic staff on students' needs and expectations; and
- serve as an explicit example of University and Faculty support for students.

The selection and training of the student leaders was an integral part of the initiative. A call was made by one of the academic project leaders to the education student community with a request for project volunteers who had already completed the first year education course involved in this trial. Recommendations were sought from teaching staff who had previously taught these students and two were selected. These leaders undertook training through a two-day Meet Up¹ training program conducted by one of the institutional stakeholders and member of the project team. One of the decisions facilitated and made by the student leaders concerned the mode of support. The wider student community was polled on the appropriate technology platform to conduct the student-student interactions. The options of Facebook, email, twitter, and face-to-face were provided and 87% of those surveyed chose a Closed Facebook option. The two student leaders then proceeded to establish the Closed

Facebook platform, restricting its use to the current first year education student cohort.

The course, *Foundations of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, was chosen due to its complexity. It is the first Professional Experience Course offered in the program and catered for over 400 Early Childhood, Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education and Training students.

At the start of semester 2, 2016, all students studying the course were invited to join the Closed Facebook site. This invitation—including the text— was developed by the student leaders (see Figure 1), the purpose being to harness the two student leaders' voices of their prior first year experience to authenticate the invitation.

The project team held fortnightly meetings initially and then as needed, to monitor the progress of the initiative, solve problems and develop the project's next steps (e.g., planning the research study and the writing of the ethics application.

Students who used the Closed Facebook site completed a short participation survey on a voluntary basis. The Course Leader was asked to informally share reflections related to having the Closed Facebook site embedded within the

Why join the first experience at USQ Closed Facebook Page in Foundations of Curriculum and Pedagogy?

Attention all students, are you stressed or feeling overwhelmed? Are you struggling with your assignments? Do you feel alone and don't know what to do? Then we have the solution for you! Our support group is run by students, for students. This group has been designed to help guide you through your university journey, to show you that you are not alone and what you are feeling is normal. So join this group – share your excitement, ask questions and take control of your learning. We (Trent and Courtney) are here to share our experiences and help point out possible pathways where needed. This is not a site to talk about (the course) – the Study Desk forums are for that – this is a site for sharing in a safe supportive space with peers who have 'been there and done that' – and survived their first year of learning at (your university)' <https://www.facebook.com/groups/269829403379860/>

Figure 1: Invitation to join Facebook site

¹ Meet-Up is the brand name of a peer assisted learning program conducted by students for students at USQ

course. Additional key data reported here emerged from a Reflective Project Evaluation phase based on written accounts by each member of the project team followed by a research group debriefing episode to clarify accounts and check the validity of the interpretations and subsequent findings.

Reflective Project Evaluation

Methods of evaluative data collection and analysis

A participatory action research methodology was deployed for the reflective evaluation stage (Kemmis, 2008; McIntyre, 2008). The two student leaders, facilitators of the Closed Facebook, and four academic project staff members answered the following questions:

- What were the intended results of the initiative? (What was planned?)
- What have been the actual results thus far? (What really happened?)
- What caused the results? (Explain the difference between 'intended' and 'actual'.)
- What has been learnt? (Personally and for the project team.)

Evidence of outcomes and effectiveness

The site provided a 'safe' space, outside the formal course environment, where questions could be asked and knowledge shared. Student participants felt part of a collaborative community where they could both seek and provide assistance. The course examiner saw evidence that student participants felt supported with the just-in-time support provided by the student partners who served as an 'engagement bridge' to learning. The student leaders welcomed the opportunity to support others by sharing their experiences and

developed invaluable personal leadership skills. These student leaders became change agents and developed understanding of key team skills finding that 'whilst I was inactive other members were helping to guide each other'. The student-for-student learning community allowed the student leaders to grow as moving-through-University 'experts'.

The data indicated that student participants felt comfortable, recognized and acknowledged. The students recognised the value and experienced the differences the site made in their learning experience. Most students reported that they enjoyed using the online based forum to post questions concerning their overall experience and that students enjoyed posting tips based on what study methods worked best for them, thus contributing to the feeling of them being part of an online learning community (see Table 1).

In particular the growth in the Student Partners understanding of leadership and support was significant (see the examples linked to the numbered points in the Student Partners column of Table 1 and the italicised extracts taken from the Student Partners' responses). Amongst other things the findings revealed that the initiative empowered the student partners to be leaders (No 2). It confirmed their notion that student participants were generally keen to help each other by answering queries and were willing to take on responsibility for the learning of others (No 1). The Student Partners believed they '*made a difference*' (No 3) and '*if one student was having a problem there are always other students experiencing or feeling the same*' (No 7) but also that '*whilst I was inactive my partner was helping*' (No 8). Leadership was therefore understood as a team effort (No. 8 & 9) entailing facilitation (No 1.) and support enabling them to share 'expert experiential knowledge' (No. 4) of being a student in the first year at the university.

Table 1: Collating initial findings according to participant role

Student Participants	Student Partners	Academics
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Valued sharing concerns with peers (not alone) 2. Non-threatening support 3. Built agency 4. Someone that listened 5. Welcomed by online learners in particular 6. Academics unaware of certain concerns raised 7. Welcomed study & organisational tips from student partner peers 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Facilitated other student's learning 2. Built personal leadership capability 3. Made a difference 4. Shared knowledge and experience 5. Possibly best to provide support in first semester 6. Best for support to not be attached to a course but broadly 7. Help for one helped other students 8. Shared facilitation worked well 9. True partnership with academics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Supported transition thinking from student into 'pre-service professional' 2. Learned from student partners 3. Timing for support might depend partly on discipline 4. Developed student partners ability to self-reflect 5. Student partners show empathy 6. Emphasis needed to be on experience not course content 7. True partnership

Conclusions and next steps

The initiative was successful in that it served three purposes:

1. The students who engaged in the Closed Facebook site gained confidence to ask questions of their facilitators because it was a 'safe' space devoid of lecturer presence. It was a place where they could share what they learnt from others and that provided them with 'just-in-time' support. It was an ongoing induction into university processes/skills.
2. The student facilitators developed significant leadership skills and confidence. They felt valued for their expertise by both the academics involved and the students who engaged in the Closed Facebook site. By the academics valuing their voice, the student leaders felt they were equal members of the team and felt empowered

to make suggestions and guide the ways the project unfolded.

3. The academic staff involved learned from the student leaders about their own experiences and therefore developed understandings transferrable into their own teaching practice. Ongoing research and evaluation of the project and the broader student feedback received will inform future direction and planning regarding the support for students in their first year of study at USQ and the power of actively partnering with students at various points along their learning journey.

Follow up interviews are currently underway with student participants to investigate in more detail their experiences and to ascertain if there have been any ongoing benefits from their participation in the project. It is planned that the student leaders will be involved in the ongoing research and will in partnership with the

project academics write a journal article for publication.

Incorporated into our future planning will be the valuable feedback the team received from the 2017 STARS Conference session where this initiative was presented. End of session discussion centred on the differences between this initiative and the already well-established peer-assisted learning program (Meet-Up) already embedded in a range of academic courses and programs. Emphasis within this new initiative, which focuses on the actual experience of negotiating the varied avenues and obstacles to learning at the university, was seen to add value by complementing the existing program.

The placement of the initiative in the second semester of the first year of experience at the university was questioned. Further discussion will ensue as to whether starting at the beginning of the year would be more beneficial or would it add to student feelings of being 'overloaded' with information from the various other orientation programs offered to students? An alternative would be to start the first year of experience support mid-way through first semester, ending mid-way through second semester, so that student leaders could share their experiences of enrolling in courses, dropping courses, seeking ongoing enrolment advice and the like.

Once these questions are answered, further dissemination and advocacy will be undertaken, seeking support for this initiative to be undertaken as a university-wide approach to both establishing authentic student partnerships and supporting students in their first year of experience at the university.

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