
The Student Peer Mentor Program in its Trial Year – A Mentor's Perspective

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Introduction

In 1994, the Student Peer Mentor Program was trialled in the Bachelor of Laws course at the Queensland University of Technology. As part of the program, students such as myself who had successfully completed Torts and Contracts, were employed as student peer mentors in one of these subjects. This paper examines the program from my perspective as a mentor in Torts. I give some personal insights about my experience as a peer mentor as well as discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Finally, I make suggestions about the development of the program and its potential in future years.

The Student Peer Mentor Program — An Overview

The Student Peer Mentor Program was designed to actively involve students in their learning of the law. By encouraging them to analyse the law, it was hoped that their understanding of the subject would be enhanced. The other important objective was to develop a co-operative approach to the study of law in a group situation.

The core of the program was the peer mentor group meetings which in 1994 were run for one hour on a weekly basis in Torts and for two hours fortnightly in Contract. At these meetings, a student peer mentor facilitated the learning of the student group by encouraging the discussion of the previous week's lecture. They also fostered the analysis of new concepts and the application of these concepts to a legal problem similar to the kind to be done in the staff-led seminars. Finally, the mentors also attended lectures and took notes to model successful student behaviour.

The role of a mentor in the program was to facilitate, and this role was not to be confused with that of a tutor in the staff-led seminars that were held after the peer

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mentor group meetings. The mentor's task was not to teach the law but to use the collective pool of student knowledge to enable the group to gain a broad, "big picture" understanding of the law.¹ In contrast, a tutor's role in seminars is primarily teaching the substantive law.

Strengths of the Program

Greater Understanding

I found that the outstanding practical benefit for the students was that attending the peer mentor group meetings contributed to their greater understanding of the law. The program was designed so that the students were armed only with their own knowledge so that they would be encouraged to discuss their opinions and think about the principles involved.

I saw the value of this active participation when a group would sometimes begin the meeting by saying they understood the law. However, when I challenged them to apply it, they discovered that their practical understanding was lacking. This realisation enabled them to identify where their knowledge was inadequate and allowed them to work towards a better understanding. The meetings were especially helpful with concepts such as the duty of care and proximity because they need to be discussed before they can be truly understood.

This greater understanding was illustrated by the level of discussion at the peer mentor group meetings. The groups were much more fluent with the law and their discussions operated on a vastly higher level than the year before when I studied Torts without the benefit of the peer mentor program.

The level of understanding was even further improved because the students, now with a base understanding from the peer mentor group meetings, were able to utilise their time in seminars more effectively in grappling with the more difficult concepts. I was told by several tutors that the level of questioning in their staff-led seminars was more advanced than in previous years.

Efficient Study through Mentor Groups

I believe that the greatest motivation for students to attend the peer mentor group meetings is that they reduce the time needed for private study. I called the meetings "private study done in a group" and believe they are a forum for private study with one vital difference. In the peer mentor group meetings, an individual can harness not only his or her own knowledge but that of the collective pool provided by the group.

I found that using this pool of student knowledge resulted in more efficient learning with the students gaining a deeper understanding of the law. To cover the

¹ The mentors were not permitted to teach because although they had completed the subject that they mentored in, they did not have the depth of knowledge and experience that is required to teach.

same material without the peer mentor group meetings would take more time and the quality of work would generally not be as good.

Non-Threatening Environment

Another strength that I found with the mentor program was that it was a far less threatening forum than a lecture or a staff-led seminar. Because there were only students at a peer mentor group meeting, the fear of making a mistake was lessened allowing students to be more expressive. This made the program especially useful in first year subjects such as Torts and the Law of Contract. First year students are sometimes intimidated by the aura of the Faculty so giving them a chance to express themselves in these meetings allows them to improve their understanding without being overawed by the presence of a member of the academic staff.

This aspect of the program was highlighted by both of my groups in a survey that I conducted at the beginning of Semester Two. In addition, this strength was practically illustrated to me when a combined-degree student, who had rarely spoken in any of his seminars the year before, was heatedly arguing his point during one peer mentor group meeting obviously feeling a lot more relaxed with this format. Finally, the meetings had the further benefit in that confidence to speak in that sort of situation eventually extended into the staff-led seminars.

Needs of First Year Students

I believe that the program was especially beneficial for first year students. Law is a unique discipline and the peer mentor group meetings in first year served as a forum for discussions about the skills needed to succeed.

I also found that an additional benefit for the first year students was the realisation that the difficulties in studying law are often common to most students. To know that "you are not alone" and to have a forum like the peer mentor group meetings in which these issues can be addressed, reduces student alienation as well as improving the general knowledge of the group.

Group Learning Skills

I saw benefits from the mentor program that went further than just improving the learning of the law. The program fostered co-operative study, promoted communication and expanded social circles. The benefits have also extended beyond the peer mentor group meetings themselves. Informal groups of students who participated in the program are now working together in other subjects and using a similar approach to that used in the groups.

When I surveyed the students in my meetings, group learning was highlighted as an important factor by both groups. This was personally very rewarding because I had anticipated that the management of the group dynamics would be the greatest challenge that I would face as a mentor. To see that that issue had also been isolated

as an important factor by my groups meant that they had embraced the philosophy of the program and were working with group goals in mind.

With all of these positive results, the Student Peer Mentor Program was a success. However, the program was not perfect and there were opportunities to improve.

Opportunities to Improve

Expectations on Mentors to Teach

The greatest challenge that I faced was the expectation by the students that I would teach rather than facilitate. Although this attitude was understandable, it would have undermined the students' development of a deeper understanding of the law. I found that this was very difficult to deal with because some students became very frustrated when I refused to adopt the role of a tutor and teach them. This placed quite a deal of strain on me especially because some of these students were also part of my peer group in other subjects.

I believe this expectation to teach stems from the misconception that the peer mentor group meetings are another form of seminar. If instead the peer mentor groups are seen as "private study done in a group", rather than seminars, this expectation should be lessened. This problem has been reduced in 1995 by timetabling the staff-led seminars straight after the peer mentor group meetings and so allowing a peer mentor to leave questions to be resolved in the seminar that follows. I do, however, believe that this will always be an issue to contend with.

Need for Student Co-Operation

Although one of the strengths of the program was that it relied heavily on the participation of the students, I believe that it was also a weakness because when they did not co-operate, the peer mentor group meetings deteriorated. There is little that can be done to overcome this problem because it is merely an incident of group learning that is also present in seminars and lectures.

This deterioration happened occasionally in my groups and I found it very hard to combat. As I mentioned before, it is difficult to be responsible for directing a group of your peers. However, I believe that because the role of the mentor is to facilitate the group's learning, I was justified in taking action to ensure that the group was still functioning. I found that being firm with disruptive students was important otherwise I came close to losing control of the group. Finally, another way to minimise the impact of a defiant group was to emphasise to the students the benefit of the program and their participation in it.

Need for Direction in Peer Mentor Group Meetings

One area of student concern was that the law was confusing and when students grappled with concepts for the first time there were many wide and varied opinions. Although this was a great strength of the program as the group's discussion was

given a wider context, this was also a disadvantage because sometimes it was not clear as to what the law actually was. However, in some cases where the law was not settled, such as proximity, some measure of uncertainty might be the only alternative.

I do not perceive this confusion as being a problem because the peer mentor group meetings are merely a forum for “private study done in a group”. When a student studies alone the same confusion may arise so if the meetings are seen as a type of private study then some uncertainty is to be expected. The advantage is though that in a group often there will be one person who is not confused as to what the law is and he or she can help the rest of the group. I also found that by asking one of the students to record all of the group’s ideas on the board, the issues became a lot more manageable allowing the students to reach a greater understanding. In addition, the confusion is never permanent for the role of seminars that follow the peer mentor group meetings is to clarify the law.

Finally, although as a mentor I was not permitted to teach, I was able to ensure a direction for the group thereby reducing their confusion. I did this by asking questions so that the students were still encouraged to think and develop their own opinions.

My Experience as a Student Peer Mentor

Personal Professional Development

My experience as a student peer mentor was a very enriching one. The program was most useful in developing my ability to read body language. I gained this new perspective on the interaction between people because during the peer mentor group meetings I was not directly involved in the group’s conversations and was able to observe independently. The mentors were surveyed by the Faculty at the end of the year and agreed with this. One mentor in particular commented that she had “learnt about people and fine tuned her ability to read body language and to direct conversation”.

My “people skills” were further improved by my experience as a mentor because I realised that often the same ideas expressed to different people led to vastly different responses. I discovered that I needed to express myself a couple of times in different ways to ensure that all members of the group could understand. Further, in dealing with people I learnt the fine balance between encouraging students to express their opinion while at the same time ensuring that their opinion was constructive for the group. I found that I had to be very gentle in guiding people back to the group’s goals otherwise I would stifle their desire to participate.

The experience has also improved my own understanding of the law of torts and I found that I was able to grasp the complex issues more readily than when I first studied the subject. One mentor stated in the Faculty survey: “I have become more confident, assertive and comfortable with the application and learning of the law”. My group learning skills have also improved allowing me to utilise better the

advantages of group work in my own study. Another mentor agreed saying that it “made me rethink how I study, and about different learning methods”.

Although there were some difficulties, I enjoyed the challenge of being a mentor. Often I would conclude a peer mentor group meeting feeling satisfied that the students had understood the legal issues involved and been able to apply them. When surveyed, a lot of mentors agreed and one mentor commented on “the satisfaction of doing it [mentoring]”. He went on to say that “you are on a ‘high’ after a good meeting”.

Finally, the mentor program has improved my confidence in leadership and group situations. One mentor commented that “as a mentor I have gained more confidence in myself and my abilities especially in the area of speaking in and to a group”. Overall I found the job challenging and rewarding and one that improved my ability to relate to people as well as to new situations.

Training Workshop for Mentors

To prepare for my role as a mentor, I was required to attend a two day residential workshop. During the workshop, the mentors were familiarised with the philosophy behind the program and why it was being introduced. We were taught communication skills as well as the stages of group development. We were also given advice as to how to structure our peer mentor group meetings and were even put into practice mentoring situations. The workshop was excellent and without it the first few meetings would have been almost impossible.

However, I believe that for a job like mentoring the best training is that which is done on the job. Because facilitating a group of strangers is such a unique situation, there is no training that can exactly replicate it. It was for this reason that I was comfortable with deviating from the “recommended” procedure taught at the workshop. For the first couple of peer mentor group meetings I followed the guidelines, but then I changed the structure to reflect what the group desired. I believe that flexibility to adapt the meetings to the needs of the students is a big advantage of the program and ensures that the students derive maximum benefit from it.

This need for flexibility was recognised at the 1995 training workshop. Here the experience gained from the previous year by both academic staff and the mentors² ensured that the workshop gave a more practical and useful insight into the mentor experience.

Improvement in my Mentoring

I was very nervous and unsure of myself when I conducted my first peer mentor group meeting. Co-ordinating the discussion of a group of my peers was very intimidating. However, the more meetings that I facilitated the more confident I

² Four of the 1994 mentors were reappointed in 1995 to give the program the benefit of some first hand experience. This experience was especially utilised at the training workshop.

became. By the end of the year, I felt comfortable in my peer mentor role and enjoyed the demands of facilitating a group. Heated discussions were now a measure of success instead of a source of concern!

My skills as a mentor also improved as the year progressed. As I mentioned earlier, the best training for mentoring is to learn “on the job” so inevitably at the outset there was a lot I still had to learn. However, my knowledge and skills improved very quickly and so did my peer mentor group meetings. By the end of the year, I was very happy with my ability to direct my groups’ learning.

Specific Challenges of Peer Mentoring

During my employment as a mentor I was confronted with a number of challenges. A few of the more important ones relate to managing group disharmony, maintaining professionalism, discovering the students’ needs and fostering group enthusiasm during the peer mentor group meetings.

Group Disharmony

The nature of group dynamics meant that it was inevitable that there would be some group disharmony. When it arose, I found it very hard to deal with because it involved some of my friends. Although it was difficult, I felt justified in asking them to modify their behaviour to suit the needs of the group. I believe that my role was to facilitate the groups’ learning and that I was obliged to take action to ensure that this goal was met. Confronting these students on this issue was the hardest challenge I faced as a mentor.

Professionalism

Another challenging aspect of being a mentor was maintaining the balance between professional and personal life. In the survey of the mentors, another mentor agreed, commenting that it was “hard to balance professional and social life — some people in my group did not understand where the line was drawn and were not too happy when I refused to cross it”.

This was an issue that I faced because I was already friends with most of the people in my groups. I believe, however, that it was crucial for respect and credibility that I did not compromise myself or allow any favouritism. In this respect, a mentor faces a greater challenge than a tutor because some of the people in the mentor’s meetings are in his or her social group.

Student Surveys

To get feedback from the students on their progress, I conducted two surveys. They responded well with honesty and some practical suggestions for improvement. I found that this information was invaluable because it allowed me to tailor the peer

mentor group meetings to the students' needs so that they were gaining the maximum benefit. This flexibility was a great strength that was unique to the mentor program.

Group Enthusiasm in Learning

I believe that people learn best while they are enthusiastic so this year I have made my meetings more dynamic because I found that this was the best way to achieve group enthusiasm. Encouragement was another important way of energising my groups. After a productive meeting, a positive affirmation of what had been achieved made the group feel more enthusiastic about learning and encouraged them to continue coming.

Potential of the Program

I know that the mentor program has vast potential because I have experienced it in many of my meetings. These meetings would begin with the set problem as usual but then the group's energy would take over the meeting and drive the discussion. The students became personally responsible for their own learning. They would pose questions for each other, appoint people to take issues to the next seminar and they would develop an answer to the set problem on the white board by themselves. My only task was to keep their discussion moving in the right direction. My experience in peer mentor group meetings like these makes me believe in the value of the program and the active learning that it promotes.

Conclusion

The Student Peer Mentor Program began as a trial in the Faculty of Law in 1994. The program proved successful in providing a deeper understanding of Torts and the Law of Contract, which made it an invaluable asset in the learning of the law. There were some initial difficulties with the program but these problems have been identified by the mentors and the Faculty, and have been addressed in 1995.

QUT's Faculty of Law is using an exciting new approach harnessing the vast potential of the student body. The Student Peer Mentor Program is and will continue to be one of the most exciting, innovative and rewarding educational tools used by the Faculty.