

Involving Students in Their Education:

Service, Research, and Relational Learning in a Peer Mentoring Program



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"I've gained valuable experience for my future of being a teacher because I feel like, the more I work with students, the more I work with peers, the more I work with professionals in the field, the better experience and more knowledge I'm going to have as a first year teacher in the next year, year and a half, and I feel like that experience right there is more valuable than any experience I could have sitting in a class, reading a text book."

I. Overview

The Peer Mentoring Project is a program that was started as a way to support undergraduate teacher candidates in their required Educational Psychology course. Mentoring has been found to increase students' academic success, social skills, self efficacy, and ability to refine their professional dispositions. This discussion proposes a forum for dialogue and reflection about mentoring programs, their structure, and their benefits to both students and mentors.

II. The philosophy of mentoring

The mentoring project has served as a vehicle to engage the students in relational learning. Relational learning is a way of being with students from a social constructionist perspective where students, mentors and professors learn from each other through the back and forth sharing of ideas. The project invites students and professors to enter into a dialogue about learning with their peers. At the same time, the involvement of the mentors deconstructs the hierarchy within the traditional teaching relationship and opens space for more collaborative experiences. Most students come to university with the traditional model in mind. While there may be a place and time for a teacher-centered model, the relational approach lends itself to the active process of co-constructing knowledge not only in the classroom but outside in the world.

III. Framework: A historical background and research on mentoring

"I think the best benefit for anyone who would be thinking about it would be just that it really does keep you kind of sharp and prepared for [the Praxis] because you're constantly talking about Vygotsky and Piaget again, just like you were in the semester you took the course, so I think it does just kind of keep it fresh in your mind and give you the experience of teaching because, you know, mentoring really is kind of teaching or, at least, facilitating. So, I think anytime an education student gets an opportunity to help someone else understand something, they should take it, if for no other reason than it will help with the Praxis II."

Mentoring has been the focus of much research over the past few decades. In one example, Smith (2008), evaluated a new mentoring program, which utilized peer mentors who had already successfully completed the course they were mentoring, for outcomes. Data was collected in the form of surveys, peer mentors' assignments, and interviews. Findings of this study suggest that students are influenced by the presence of peer mentors who attend and assist with their classes, even if they are not formally paired with a mentor; specifically, the advantage of having the mentor in class, offering his or her perspectives and expertise on both the class and the class content, was believed to enhance the students' overall class experience, as well as the building of relationships, trust, and credibility by the mentors (Smith, 2008). This shows that the results of mentoring relationships can be secondary and residual, as well as being a primary focus. Additionally, it suggests that even students who are too busy or would not normally choose a mentor for personal reasons can benefit from the presence of a mentor in the classroom. This suggests a strategy that can be used when designing a mentoring program, both to help students who are aware that they want help, and to assist those who many not know that they need help, or who initially do not want any assistance. A mentoring relationship can also have a positive effect on the mentors themselves. According to Good, Halpin, and Halpin (2000), mentors who participated in a peer mentoring program targeting the mentees most likely also received many benefits, including academic outcomes, increased retention, improved social skills, and increased levels of self-satisfaction, as individuals who have impacted someone else's learning outcomes.

IV. Our mentoring project: What it is and how it began

This project began four years ago as a service-learning project. Two years ago, the department offered the experience as a 3-credit hour graded course. The Mentors gave us the inspiration to make it more of a traditional course where class meetings became more regular and the option to attend any or all of the Educational Psychology classes is available. Students invest a remarkable amount of time beyond the expectations for the course. The Educational Psychology class is also offered as a Summer I study abroad course. The Mentoring Project was expanded to include an international mentoring experience. Students who take the class in Florence are supported by the Mentors in Italy and on-line when the students return to the States to finish the course. As you can see, the possibilities for this sort of engaged learning experience are many. We have decided to propose the Special Topics course as a standing elective for all students at the university.