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Peer Mentor Leadership Training: Theory and Implementation

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Introduction

College is a time of major transition for young adults. It presents a unique opportunity as decisions regarding a wide variety of options unfold for the first time without being under the guidance and eye of a guardian. Chosen paths offer a glimpse into the inner motivations behind one's character and the interest that many students have shown for peer mentoring exemplifies traits of benevolence and leadership. In addition to providing peers with a positive role model, there are opportunities for mentors to expand on many interpersonal qualities that are important for success in a multitude of contexts. Integral to the potential of success for both mentors and mentees is the quality and organization of the training program and the specific methodology that helps generate the confidence and adeptness needed to interact skillfully with peers.

In the fall of 2007 I conducted a study at a large urban Historically Black University in the Southeast that investigated the short-term affects of peer mentoring on study skills. The study required training nine volunteer mentors to work with pairs of freshman developmental students throughout the fall semester. I found upper class students who had no previous mentoring experience, but there was no institutional vehicle for conducting the training necessary for running a quality program. It was necessary for mentors to gain enough aptitude within the first two weeks of school to start mentoring sessions with a modicum of effectiveness, with additional training planned throughout the semester. This article focuses on the background research that guided decisions about what philosophy should guide training methodology, specific details concerning methods used, and suggestions for refining the process based on feedback and results from the study.

Background Research

Chovanec (1998) described mentoring as a means to help students develop a sense of self-directedness and independence in their work. Additionally, Clawson's (1996) research noted the distinction of including personal life issues in the process, as well as teaching-specific knowledge and skills. Healy (1997) offered a working definition of mentoring that used two elements to distinguish it from such related terms as teaching and supervising. One element was reciprocity, relating to the potential for change in both the mentor and mentee. The other was the process of identity transformation for either party. Healy's definition described mentoring as "...a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé), aimed at promoting the career development of both" (p. 10). Thus, the mentor approaches the mentoring experience with a sense of leadership and accomplishment and stands to add to those characteristics through the interaction.

Research on the use of mentoring showed a variety of results concerning details of program development, implementation, and effectiveness, with some showing strong positive results (Gabelnick et al. 1997; Salintrini 2005) and others questioning its relevance (Cullingford 2006; Wahlberg et al, 2005). However, recent studies that focused on improving persistence rates for minority students were positive in their recommendations for using mentoring as a support vehicle (Ulloa and Herrera 2006; Herzig 2004; Thomas 2005; Leichnitz 2006; Nolan 2005). With a strong need to improve persistence rates for students who take developmental courses when starting college (Perkhounkova et al. 2006; Brothen et al. 2004), there was strong rationale for better understanding training processes to

maximize benefit for mentors and mentees.

Evolution of Training Philosophies

Through the impetus of Carl Rogers (1957), counselor training evolved into a more highly structured and accessible system in the 1960s. Scientific processes evolved that synthesized several different approaches to training methodology. After this transitional period, counselor training literature tended to group training systems into three major categories which encompassed most other single component models such as didactic instructions, feedback, and modeling (Daniels 1994). These systems were human resources training (Carkhuff and Truax 1965), interpersonal process recall (Kagan et al. 1967), and microcounseling/microtraining (Ivey et al. 1967).

Of the three categories, Microcounseling/microtraining was considered the best foundational philosophy on which to base my training program, due in part to a need to train inexperienced undergraduate students within a short time frame. This strategy (based on principles derived from Social Learning Theory, Ivey and Authier 1978), involved activities such as role-playing, videotaping feedback, supportive role modeling, and facilitator oversight, to teach trainees specific skills related to communication. These microskills were taught sequentially and served as building blocks toward the wider scope of mentoring intervention.

Kasdorf and Gustafson (1978) conducted the first comprehensive study of microcounseling/microtraining with a review of research dating from 1968 to 1976. The study found this methodology used skills associated with facilitative counseling, such as minimal encouragers, questioning techniques to encourage communication, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, and summarization. It was found to be a superior training technique when compared to didactic lecture and traditional supervision and also showed effectiveness when used in conjunction with other systems, particularly those that addressed more complex communication skills (e.g. showing empathy and counseling techniques). A meta-analysis by Baker et al. (1990) arrived at similar conclusions to the Kasdorf and Gustafson study, finding that microcounseling/microtraining was more effective than alternative major training programs in many cases.

Carkhuff (2000a, 2000b) expanded on the principles and techniques of microcounseling/microtraining with his human technology system, which provided the field of mentor training with an effective interpersonal skills-based model that encompassed intellectual, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal attributes. Components of the system included:

- Telling – describing cognitive information underlying the skill
- Showing – demonstrating skills in a modeling context
- Doing – hands-on practice using the skills in training sessions
- Repeating – going over practice opportunities in a variety of settings
- Applying – using the skills in a practical field setting

For instance, a mentor would study the concepts important for active listening, have the skill demonstrated by a trainer, practice the skill in a controlled class setting repeated times, and use the skill in a mentoring session that included trainer observation.

Baumgarten et al. (2003) expanded on the human technology system by emphasizing the importance of developing a higher level of empathetic responses to mentors, based on two studies that showed students had the ability to learn this skill (Sultanoff 1982; Black 1989). Teaching mentors to use the following specific series of questions during the mentoring sessions facilitated learning this skill set.

1. What is the situation?
2. How does the client feel about the situation?
3. Why does the client care?

4. What is the client's opinion/belief?
5. What is the unique meaning?
6. What did the client do to create/perpetuate the situation?
7. How does the client feel about himself or herself?
8. What can't the client do/figure out?
9. What does the client want to (learn to) do?
10. What steps does the client take to attain the goal?

This series of questions helped me formulate a methodology for training mentors to converse during practice sessions. They related especially well to the specific short-term goals of our mentoring sessions, which focused on improving specific study skills. Additional details about this methodology are explained in the following section.

*A website that gives a good foundation for understanding the academic foundation for mentoring programs is: http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/schoolbased_relationships.pdf

They also offer an audio explanation of the slides. Go to:

http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/training_downloads.php and look under the following heading: Relationships in School-Based Mentoring Programs

Mentors and the Training Methodology

During the spring semester 2007 I solicited nine volunteer mentors from two different student organizations on campus with the following characteristics: (1) eight females, one male; (2) five were 19 years old, two were 21, one was 23, and one was 40; (3) five were sophomores, three were seniors, and one was a graduate assistant; (4) one was Hispanic and eight were African American. The mentors were assigned to work with freshman developmental students one hour/week to help improve their study habits and learning skills. Each mentor was assigned to two students who were paired according to similar deficiencies in learning strategy skills, as measured by the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) (Weinstein, Schulte, and Palmer, 2002). Two initial two-hour training sessions took place prior to starting mentoring sessions during the first week of the semester, with further training continuing on a bimonthly basis during two-hour sessions.

*A website that offers a mentoring toolkit that mentors can use to help organize their efforts is: http://apps.mentoring.org/training/TMT/Mentor_training_toolkit.pdf

The first two-hour training included an overview of organizational details, as well as a discussion that outlined responsibilities and expectations that were expected from a mentor. This was followed by a demonstration that previewed communication skills that were important for success.

The first skills related to physical postures that are significant for eliciting a willingness to communicate from the mentee. Topics included squarely facing the person, maintaining openness of posture, leaning slightly forward, maintaining eye contact, and relaxing. Additionally, awareness of how to position oneself in terms of distance and proximity to chairs and tables was brought to their attention. It was important for the mentor to be close enough to show attentiveness, but not too close for comfort.

Communication skills continued with an analysis of how speech rates affect a listener's tendency to focus. I demonstrated telling a short story at different speeds, allowing the mentors to experience the tendency for the listener to lose attention when the speed was very slow. The fact that a person can understand many more words per minute than a speaker is capable of speaking can help a mentor's awareness of how to regulate speed of conversation to maintain a listener's attention.

It was important for mentors to realize the significance of maintaining awareness of their own strong feelings towards specific issues and not allow those beliefs to unduly influence their role as mentor. For instance, if a particular mentor had strong feelings about the issue of abortion and the topic came up in the course of mentee discussions, the mentor had a duty to regulate the temptation to impart directives to the mentee based on his/her own viewpoint.

The topic of how to phrase speech was next. Mentors practiced using the pronouns I and my when referencing subjects concerning personal anecdotes, rather than determiners such as most and every. It was important for mentors to take full personal responsibility for comments and not make sweeping generalizations about groups of people when expressing opinions.

The art of asking questions to elicit openness and clarity was brought up in order for mentors to fully understand what the mentee was saying. Examples of specific useful phrases were: you seem to be saying...is this right, I'm confused, let me try to say what I think you're saying, let me see if I can get all this, and you've told me a lot, let me see if I've got it. These phrases help draw forth information from the mentee to more fully understand the issues and show concern for what the mentee has to say. Starting questions with how, what, could and would rather than is, are, do, and did was another suggestion for getting mentees to open up and share more about the issues and obstacles facing them, instead of encouraging short yes or no responses that tended to limit answers.

Mentor practice with restating mentee statements was another important technique that helped the mentee feel understood. These phrases were most effective when the restatement summarized the main point of the comments. It must be really confusing trying to figure out what he wants you to do. First he says one thing, and then he writes a confusing email and changes everything around before the next class. That must be frustrating. This kind of comment acknowledges connectedness, demonstrates that the mentor gets the point, and establishes a sense of empathy.

In order to develop listening and paraphrasing skills, mentors practiced in an organized format, trying to repeat and reword short sentences (10 to 15 words) and gradually increasing the length to three-minute stories. Mentors split into groups of three for this practice. One mentor made short statements or told stories, while another mentor listened and practiced rephrasing and eliciting further comments by using short phrases such as: really, and sounds interesting. Timing these comments was an important point, as ill timed or overly frequent use tended to stifle mentee participation. The third mentor listened to the exchange, took notes, and offered feedback about the effectiveness of the active listening. Each student had the opportunity to participate in a different role, acting as either an active participant, or being able to sit back and evaluate his or her classmates through careful analysis. As they gained a sense of how to summarize with short statements, longer stories were used to give more realistic opportunities to practice listening and responding skills.

Mentors were taught that the goal of mentoring related to helping students explore ways to solve their own problems, develop options, unravel obstacles, and lead them through the process of figuring out solutions. Problems were broken down into three main types. A gap was a lack of information or an inability to perform a specific skill, such as not knowing about available mentoring services or not being able to understand reading material. A barrier was an obstacle either within or outside the mentee's control, such as feeling anxious while taking tests (within) or a teacher who was not fair (outside). Unknown situations referred to a general lack of experience about how to handle a problem, such as how to communicate with a teacher about absences or tardiness.

Mentors were presented with the following format for discussing problems and formulating solutions, which evolved from the methodology introduced by Baumgarten et al. (2003).

1. The situation is... "So, you got an F".

2. How you end up feeling is... "Bad, ashamed, angry".
3. What this means to you is... "May have to repeat the class, may lose financial aid, may be put on academic probation".
4. What you did to create this situation was... "I watched the basketball game instead of writing my paper".
5. What you can't do is... "Write a decent paper, make up the work".
6. What you want to do is... "Write a good paper and make up the work".
7. What you plan to do is... "Ask the teacher for a second chance, arrange to work with a writing tutor, write the paper anyway and ask the teacher to accept it for partial credit".

*An excellent website that can be used to hone skills related to providing feedback in a manner that encourages trust and openness in the respondent is:

<http://www.learncustomerserviceonline.com/Preview/ActiveListeningCS/FrameMaster1.htm>

It helps differentiate between active and passive listening and gives the interviewer good examples of techniques such as: acceptance response, repeating, paraphrasing, clarifying, and summarizing. Techniques for using transition sentences and an overview of when to employ these methodologies are also covered.

Quantitative/Qualitative Results

While the training methods helped mentors develop better communication skills that facilitated efforts to encourage mentees to express themselves, results from the study lent insight about the details of affecting substantive behavioral changes. For instance, some students had never considered dedicating regular time for studying before and found it difficult to commit to a daily schedule in light of attractive alternatives. Communication between mentors and mentees was generally characterized as being honest and open, however, the net results of changing study habits tended to be intractable for many mentees. Results such as these highlighted the potential and challenges for peer mentoring to support these kinds of behavioral changes.

Results also shed light on the time element involved and what a program can realistically expect in terms of behavioral changes within the course of a semester. The study used data from the Learning and Study Skills Inventory (LASSI) to evaluate mentee progress according to 10 specific learning strategies that fit within three general categories. Strategies under will included attitude(ATT), anxiety(ANX), and motivation(MOT); skill was composed of information processing(INP), main ideas(SMI), and test strategies(TST); and self-regulation encompassed concentration (CON), self testing strategies(SFT), time management(TMT), and use of study aids (STA) ((Weinstein et al. 2002) Mentors were provided with an organized format for evaluating how specific learning strategies were influenced by their efforts. Results indicated skills associated with will showed the most improvement while skills related to self-regulation showed the least (table 1). These data correlated with quantitative data from analyzing mentee results from the LASSI, which indicated testing strategies and test preparation were the weakest skills while general attitude was the strongest (table 2) (Rubin 2008).

Findings from the LASSI also showed scores were above the 50th percentile level compared to the national sample. According to these results, there was not a strong imperative for these students to

Table 1
Comparison of Study Skill Success/Failure/One Sample Test

Variable	t	df	Sig.
ANX	.628	19	.537
ATT	1.405	19	.176
CON	.840	19	.411

improve their study habits, while statistics showed the graduation rate for developmental students from this population was below 20% (Rubin 2008). This discrepancy suggested an inflated self-conception of the mentees learning strategy acumen. A common sentiment among mentees was that they did not feel a need for the services offered by peer mentoring or the information offered to improve learning strategies through coursework, because they did not feel their skills needed improvement (Rubin, 2008).

INP	-.069	19	.946
MOT	1.019	19	.321
SFT	-2.742	19	.013
SMI	1.681	19	.109
STA	-.2400	19	.027
TMT	.217	19	.831
TST	-1.892	19	.074

Table 2
Experimental and Control Group LASSI Posttest Comparison/ANOVA

Variables	Sum of Squares	F	Sig.
ANX	17.273	432	.515
ATT	.027	.001	.978
CON	55.637	2.092	.155
INP	113.461	3.637	.063
MOT	74.694	2.588	.115
SFT	280.048	7.717	.008
SMI	8.836	.254	.617
STA	281.894	10.620	.002
TMT	131.734	3.935	.054
TST	9.001	.214	.646

The qualitative part of the study questioned the mentors about the effectiveness of the training. A commonly expressed theme was the need to connect with mentees on a personal level. Their feeling was that this type of skill was not taught and could not be taught during training sessions. One mentor commented, "I thought the information was valuable, but not actually applicable to what

Table 3
LASSI Scores/Experimental/Control Group/National Sample

Group	N(variables)	Mean	SD
Exp./Control	10	28.59	2.13
Nat.Sample	10	27.60	2.88

One-Sample Test

Group	t	df	Sig.
Exp./Control	42.413	9	.000
Nat.Sample	30.254	9	.000

we were doing. I think you just have to really be yourself, not programmed. That's the only way you're going to get through to them." Another mentor echoed these thoughts by saying, "The mentor training was OK, I just don't think you could mentor without getting a little personal." A third mentor went on to say, "In terms of student interaction you can't be trained, but it helped with general directions." The general feeling among mentors was that the reality of mentoring and the variety of conversations and issues that arose required a spontaneous response that was not programmable, not possible to predict, and impossible to train for. While simulations and role-play were a part of the training, they did not feel prepared for the real world of student interaction and problems that came up. Many of these problems related to major life decisions about whether or not to attend college and the family issues involved around these concerns. With these issues in the background, it was hard for some of the mentors to keep mentoring sessions focused on improving specific learning strategies. All of the mentors (even though those that experienced the greatest frustration with the program) had strong positive comments about their personal benefit from the experience of mentoring. The most common statements concerned the awareness and development of patience. Two comments that reflected those feelings were: (1) "I learned patience, when you don't see eye to eye with someone you learn patience," and (2) "I guess the main thing-having patience with them, because sometimes I just

wanna go like forget it, but you have to sit there and have the patience to get through it.” Another area of benefit was the development of personal and academic skills. The following statements reflected thoughts on this topic: (1) “It improved my own study habits, better communications skills and personal confidence. Also it helped me focus on my own major, which is helping youth.” (2) “It helped me make my own personal schedule and it made me see others that don’t necessarily think like me. It made me more open-minded.” (3) “It showed me areas where I was slacking, as in I’m not even going by my own. I found a little bit of ways to help myself in different areas I was working with them in, as in staying committed to our goals.”

A third area of benefit concerned the satisfaction in being able to be a leader and help other students. The following quotes were a good representation of those thoughts: (1) “I love leading people and giving advice. I’m learning how to lead myself and take my own advice.” (2) “I love helping people and I have gained two friends who know if they need something I am here for them.”

Summary

The training offered did serve as a foundation for understanding how to mentor and initiated the process of developing better communication skills. What was lacking was a training component that offered an opportunity to experience real life issues and evaluate how specific tactics worked, as well as ongoing practice in realistic settings to improve skills. Based on this feedback, I would suggest starting a resource of videotaping mentoring sessions. Each week one session could be designated for taping, with the intention of using this resource in the bi-monthly training sessions. Mentors would then have an opportunity to review real issues and actual conversations from mentoring sessions in a supportive controlled environment. They could then explore avenues for approaching problems through discussions with the trainer and practice amongst the mentor group.

Findings showed that the first learning strategies that changed related to attitudes and feelings, which may indicate that expectations to achieve comprehensive study habit transformation within a three-month time frame may be an unrealistic goal when working with freshman developmental students. Thus, peer-mentoring programs should anticipate at least a full year of effort to support positive changes. Alleviating anxiety, encouraging positive attitude, and boosting motivation should be a central focus during the first phase while the second phase should expand goals to improve test preparation, reasoning skills, use of support study aids, and test taking strategies. Limiting the focus in the first semester, establishing a solid foundation of attitude adjustment, and extending length of support may help students make long-term positive changes.

Training mentors should include discussions about mentee attitudes that may inhibit their full attention and participation. Mentors may be more adept at leading discussions to address this issue after gaining awareness about general tendencies for students from this population to inflate their self-conception of their study skills. As mentees exclaim mastery of learning strategies, mentors will be better trained to focus on underlying problems. Thus, training should include a detailed knowledge of which study habits correlate with success, as well as common pitfalls with which struggling students typically contend.

The unanimous reason given for wanting to be a volunteer mentor was exemplified by the following comment from a student that went through the developmental program without peer mentoring support but managed to succeed. “I enjoyed having an influential impact on students. I didn’t have this kind of help when I was a freshman, and I wanted to give something back. I wish I had it back then.” It is interesting to note that African Americans led other racial groups in terms of participation in mentoring initiatives and showed significant benefit from their efforts in terms of honing leadership qualities (Leonard 2002; Cameron-Kelly 2002). With an enthusiastic base of volunteers available there are good

reasons to offer mentors an effective training, thus maximizing benefits for both mentees and mentors.

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