Selling PAL Successfully: students’ perceptions on the aims and benefits of PAL

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UCL Transition Programme

• Based in the Widening Participation Unit
• Response to issues faced by first year students when making the transition to university
• Piloted in 2005 with 3 departments
• 2009/10 working with all 52 departments across the university
• 450 mentors and 3500 first year students
Peer Assisted Learning and Mentoring

- Mentors work with a group of 8:1 first year students
- Start with a meeting event in induction week
- Meet once a week for one hour during the first term
- Initial weeks are focused upon social aspects of university
- Peer Assisted Learning begins
Peer Assisted Learning

• Are we reaching all students?
• Is PAL always appropriate?
• What do staff think?
• Do our mentors know what PAL is?
• How do we train our mentors
• How do we engage first year students?
Transition Programme Data

- First year student survey
- Departmental feedback
- Mentor focus groups
- Mentor survey \((n = 127)\)

- Mentor perspective on Peer Assisted Learning from focus group data and mentor survey
Mentor demographics

Mean age = 20.46
Mentor demographics

Are you an international student?

- Yes: 19.7%
- No: 80.3%
Results – student survey

• 43% of those with a Transition Programme attended PAL sessions

• Students rated the following reasons as important in their decision to attend PAL sessions:
  - 63% timing
  - 60% topic
  - 52% using activities
  - 55% understanding what the benefit of PAL was
  - 39% the mentor
  - 25% the other students

• Reasons given for non-attendance were: I felt I no longer needed a mentor; meeting times did not suit me; I was too busy
Results: Mentor survey

- 42.5% Strongly agree
- 31.5% Agree
- 11.0% Slightly agree
- 10.3% Neutral
- 0.8% Slightly disagree
- 3.1% Disagree
- 0.8% Strongly disagree

Do you agree that you were supported as a transition mentor?
Results: Mentor survey

Do you agree that you had enough training to be a mentor?

- Strongly agree: 39.4%
- Agree: 45.7%
- Slightly agree: 7.9%
- Neutral: 3.9%
- Slightly disagree: 3.1%
Results: Mentor Survey and Focus Groups

What are the benefits of PAL for your students?
- Confidence building
- Student expectations – alleviate worries
- Allows for ‘silly’ questions and discussion that would not normally happen
- Covers the basics that are not covered by staff
- Going over what they have learnt
- Perspectives from those that have ‘been there done that’
- Study skills support

What are the benefits of PAL for you?
- Revision
- Rewarding
- Taking on ‘teaching’ responsibility
- Strengthen communication, empathy, team working and leadership skills
What is PAL? Mentor Survey

• A chance to go over material
• A less formal, less intimidating outlet for study
• To give the group confidence and reassurance
• To facilitate group learning and encourage students to help others
• To help the students to find the answer, not just give it to them
• To help students become more independent with their work
• Create a habit of discussing work with peers
• Peer Assisted learning should not be used as a session to preach and repeat what the teachers have already said but mainly listen to the students and cater to their needs and worries
• PAL acts like the gateway, with regards to academic work, between the student and teacher/lecturer
• To guide students with their academic work, NOT to tell them the answers, which is what our mentees seemed to think
What is PAL? Focus group problems

- Became a mentor as wanted to experience a ‘teaching’ role
- Spent a lot of time teaching and explaining so the students did not really get involved
- Students mistake you for a lecturer – sending essays and reports for you to look at
- Want you to help their with their homework
- In small groups it is hard to say no as they become your friends
- They start to become reliant on you
‘I do think though that the mentees expected more like real teaching, and there were times when myself and the other mentor did talk for a while on a topic TO them. However, they actually really liked this. We made an effort though to make anything we said anecdotal, and always pressed that we are not there for lecturing or teaching. We found a good balance where we gave them some information and guidance, but at the same time knew exactly where to draw the line in terms of what we can and shouldn't say, and push them to voice their own opinions instead.’
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BOUNDARIES
Why might the students not engage with PAL?

- Shy, lack of confidence
- Arrogance – ‘too cool for school’ attitude – they do not know that they do not know everything
- Do not understand that PAL is not only for students that are not able
- Worried about looking ‘dumb’ in front of other students and ‘dumb’ for attending in the first place
- PAL is patronising and ‘uncool’
- Confusion about what ‘PAL’ actually is
- Busy timetable
- Needs to be ‘relevant’ to them
Conclusions

• Most mentors know what the purpose of PAL is
• But have difficulty sticking to boundaries when pressured by students
• First years are often unsure about what PAL is and what the benefits are to them until they actually attend
• Myth of PAL is for people that are failing
• Preconceptions of mentoring as ‘un-cool’
What are we doing?

• Providing subject specific PAL training – creating models which fit different departments
• Increasing general mentoring training on setting boundaries
• Employing senior mentors to regulate group size throughout the programme – more viable group sizes
• Creating a pre-enrolment leaflet detailing the programme and its aims
• Creating an online repository for mentors to share PAL resources and ideas
• Involving department more
• Changing the name ‘mentor’?
Questions?