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Postgraduate peer support programme: enhancing community

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Abstract: *This paper reports on research conducted in relation to a Postgraduate peer support programme for Applied Psychology (Business) at Griffith University. The Peer Support Programme, funded by a Griffith University grant, was designed on principles of collaboration, adult learning and peer-assisted learning in a student community in order to counter the isolation that has been described as being endemic to the postgraduate experience. The purpose of the research was to assess the effectiveness of the peer support mechanism in terms of the degree to which it successfully embodied the principles on which it was based: peer-assisted learning in a student community, collaboration, and adult learning. We found that, while these principles did indeed appear to have been applied effectively, we needed to think more broadly about the 'student community' and to apply more vigorously the notions of peer-assisted learning and adult learning.*

Key words: *Postgraduate supervision; peer support; practice-based research*

Introduction

This study of peer support for postgraduate students is based on a project funded by a Strategic Initiatives in Research Training Scheme (SIRTS) grant from Griffith University designed to contribute to the quality of research training at Griffith University. Before the scheme was advertised, a tutor in the Applied Psychology (Business) School on the Gold Coast Campus of Griffith University—who was completing a Master's degree and applying for a PhD—was aware that many postgraduate students were feeling isolated. She sought support from the Head of School and invited assistance from the Griffith Institute for Higher Education before applying for SIRTS funding. An initial focus group was held to identify needs of postgraduate students so that a relevant programme could be developed. The central discussion points for the subsequent sessions were selected from issues raised at the focus group meeting and included:

- Time management and goal setting;
- Literature search, review and data base management;
- Formatting research questions and selecting appropriate methodology;
- The proposal, writing skills, proofreading and revision;
- Presentation skills, confirmation seminars and conferences;
- Publication syndicates and publishing as you go.

Students in the initial focus group also expressed concern about sustaining good working relationships with supervisors. To reinforce relationships among supervisors and students and to underscore that the peer support programme was intended to augment, not undermine, supervision, supervisors were invited to attend sessions. In response to student requests during the implementation of the programme, a library staff member and a highly experienced guest researcher were invited to lead two sessions, contributing to a sense of the larger university community.

The informal nature of the group, including its social dimension (tea break in each two-hour session, discussions going beyond the topics) was intended to contribute to the development of strong peer support, and the programme was designed for substantive skill development through sharing of knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how the programme countered isolation and also how well it embedded the principles of peer support, collaboration, and adult learning underlying the programme. The paper will close with a discussion of how future programmes of a similar kind might be enhanced.

Brief review of relevant literature and the principles underlying the programme

There is much documentation of the social and intellectual isolation of postgraduate students, which has been shown to be related to postgraduate student dissatisfaction, delay and withdrawal (e.g., Brown, McDowell & Race, 1995; Cesari, 1990; Conrad, 1993; Hockey, 1994; Johnston & Broda, 1996; Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Powles, 1989). Such isolation is further documented in results from the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire distributed to research higher degree graduates across Australian higher education institutions, which suggest that, of all kinds of support available to students (e.g., supervision, infrastructure support, clear goals and expectations), the intellectual climate is least satisfactory (Ainley, 2001) though PhD candidates working in the sciences are more likely to enjoy a community research experience (see also Elgar, 2002).

Some studies, limited in number, have been conducted that have to do with countering isolation and improving supervision through group approaches (e.g., Conrad, Perry & Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Jeske, 1984; Johnston, 1995; Juniper & Cooper, 2002; Salmon 1992; Zuber-Skerritt & Knight, 1986). As Johnston (1995, p. 286) pointed out, it is clear that "further work needs to be done to determine... the advantages of such models".

Conrad & Zuber-Skerritt (1995, p. 78) reported "strong, but scarce, evidence of the usefulness of supervisory groups in which postgraduate students, taking some aspects of a supervisory role themselves, act as supportive peers in promoting their own and other students' progress". Onwuegbuzie (2001) has pointed out that there may be differential impact of group approaches depending on the peer orientation of students. However, most of the documentation of such programmes is based on supervisor-initiated or institution-initiated programmes.

Our study was intended to document how particular principles underlying our peer support programme—started by a student to meet student concerns, coordinated by a student, and facilitated largely by that coordinating student—were realised. Successful PhD students look back on their experience with satisfaction, acknowledging the process as one that brings challenge, stimulation and reward (Spear, 2001). The programme was intended to take advantage of positive aspects of students' experience - what they had learned and how it

might help other students. We wished to create or enhance a research student culture like that described by Deem and Brehony (2000, p. 153) as including "shared experiences of being a research student" and "shared narratives about that experience; shared organisational ways of doing things; shared networks and activities for academic support and sociability".

We also wished to explore the effectiveness at *the postgraduate level* of peer-assisted learning or cooperative learning that has been compellingly shown to work at undergraduate levels and at primary and secondary levels (see Davidson & Worsham, 1992; Goodlad & Hirst, 1989, 1990; Hill, Gay & Topping, 1998; Jacobi, 1991; Magin & Churches, 1995; Moust, & Schmidt, 1994). There was an intention to embed in the programme adult learning principles such as building on prior experience and the need for self-direction (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Lindeman, 1926).

Another principle underlying the peer support programme was that of collaboration: to help students develop collaborative skills and habits, not through working together on a single project but by offering assistance to each other in their individual projects. The reality is that most academic research is done in collaboration as part of a research community; research is for the most part a peer-supported and peer-reviewed process. Collaboration in research is related to the higher quality and greater publishability of research (Bond & Thompson, 1996). Because the PhD process is seen as a preparation for the next generation of faculty (Austin, 2002), the peer support programme was designed to foster a collaborative spirit appropriate to future academic research that many envisage for themselves.

Methods

The aim of the study of the Postgraduate Peer Support Programme (as distinguished from programme development itself) was to explore the effectiveness of peer support for postgraduate students in a particular setting and the working out of the principles underlying the programme. The methods used were qualitative, drawing on the notion of reflective practice (Schön, 1983) and on the experience of the student coordinator and the resource person as they planned, coordinated, participated in and observed the implementation of the programme in relation to both content and process, giving special attention to the interaction at meetings and comments and feedback from participating students. Periodic debriefings between the coordinator and resource person as well as note-taking on some meetings made possible a continuing reflective process. We wanted to achieve three levels of reflection: 'Reflection to reach given objectives'; 'Reflection on the relationship between principles and practice' and 'Reflection which besides the above incorporates ethical and political concerns' (Goodman, 1984).

The postgraduate peer support programme

The programme was designed to respond to student concerns by applying the principles outlined above in the literature review section:

- peer-assisted learning in the context of a community formed to counter isolation;
- collaboration, albeit through the learning of collaborative skills and habits rather than through formal collaboration on a specific research project;
- adult learning notions, especially self-direction and sharing of experiences as a route to learning.

No 'instructional' mode was envisaged at the beginning. However, as students were continually consulted about their changing needs, interest in End-Note led to one such

instructional session, and the final session included a guest speaker. Much of the discussion in the group was designed to be stimulated by the facilitator's posing of key starter questions. For example, in the literature review session, questions were asked such as 'What problems are (were) most difficult for you in the literature search and review? What strategies have you used to try to address those problems? What have you learned from the process of literature search and review thus far?' On proposal writing, the emphasis was on the experience of people who had undertaken a successful confirmation process, during which they had presented their proposals. Students still working on their proposals were able to ask questions and learn from the more experienced students. A few stimulus materials, such as brief excerpts from literature reviews, encouraged students to think about the writing of a literature review.

Discussions ranged widely, however narrow the topic. For example, in a session on research questions and methodology, students raised such issues as the following, articulating what they had learned themselves and expressing their anxieties:

- sampling in both theoretical and practical aspects (one student emphasised the importance of finding sufficient numbers and of matching research time lines with school schedules and holidays in the case of school populations);
- conceptualisation (including diagrams or concept maps as means of developing a sense of the relationship between concepts – one person illustrated concept mapping, and another tried it in relation to her own thesis during the session);
- how to obtain informed consent and give helpful and sensitive feedback to participants (without promising too much);
- the fact that standard instruments do not always behave as expected with different populations;
- unexpected results and how to deal with them;
- the 'lack of disclosure' of research problems in much published work (it was mentioned that an article in a journal did not reveal problems experienced by the researchers, even though those difficulties were disclosed in personal conversation at a conference);
- the process of narrowing the focus of the research, with specific examples of how it was done and why.

Active peer support in the session was provided in the form of suggestions on relevant literature (e.g., books that might assist another's research), questions concerning another individual's research, sympathy for problems described, expressions of reassurance gained, sharing of useful strategies, and attentive listening and responsiveness.

Members of the group indicated the value of the session, suggesting that the process made them feel that their own individual experience was 'not bizarre', that this and other sessions made them feel enthusiastic ('fired up'). Learning how different students were approaching things was considered to be extremely useful – for example, learning about drawing conceptual models, and actually trying out that method on the whiteboard during the session to clarify concepts critical to the thesis. One student said how useful it was to understand the differences between supervisors – that some may emphasise writing as a part of the development process and others, drawing or graphing. Still another found it helpful to hear how other students did the background reading and kept records. Interestingly, the student who had demonstrated the drawing of the conceptual model observed that the experience of 'teaching' that to the others was an especially valuable learning experience.

Each session was unique, and the same people did not attend all sessions. Attendance varied; the high was 20 (students and supervisors), but the usual number was about 6. Most sessions involved the sharing of what had been learned and of feelings being dealt with. Although participation was uneven in that some students may have talked more than others in a given session, all did participate, even if a 'round robin' approach was used to ensure that this happened. The final session, suggested by the Head of School who was also consulted, was intended in part to celebrate the co-published work of students and supervisors, with supervisors and students bringing copies of their work to share after the guest speaker's presentation.

Discussion

Major concerns for us in reflecting on our own experiences as coordinator and resource person were: How well did the design of the programme come to fruition in implementation? How were the principles on which the programme was developed expressed in the outcomes? What were the implications for future programmes of this kind?

The participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity of peer support, suggesting that the sessions had fostered a sense of community and acted to reduce isolation. Even students who did not participate at all or who participated irregularly said that they were glad to know that the group activities were available. Students clearly 'taught' and 'learned from' each other as well as providing social support. Students referred in sessions to what they were learning from each other. Activity during the sessions demonstrated respect and a collaborative spirit among peers. Students were willing to share ideas and experiences in order to offer each other help.

In relation to adult learning and self-direction, the central points of discussion at each session had been identified by students themselves as areas of concern, and students were not only asked at the initial focus groups about the topics for the sessions but were consulted during the process to ensure continuing relevance to what the group wanted. Except for a requested EndNote session and the final celebratory session on publication, the group meetings consisted of student discussions in response to focal questions or stimulus materials (including their own) rather than speakers or instructors.

The positive outcomes included active participation by a number of RHD candidates, as well as masters students. Of the 26 RHD and PhD students targeted, more than half attended one or more of the sessions. The foundations for a supportive, nurturing, student-driven research community were laid. The focus was, as intended, on the lived experience of individual students.

Although all three principles appeared to have been embedded in the programme, our critical question was: How well had those principles been embedded, and how might they be embedded more deeply?

The coordinator who led more than half the sessions (herself a Masters and then PhD student as well as tutor—and co-author of this paper) observed in a written reflection:

As a new RHD student, myself, the process of organising, preparing and participating in the seminars was very useful for my own process. Especially useful was the degree of reflection that the process afforded.... In preparing for the sessions I became aware of the volume of useful material that is available on the subject of the RHD process. With

this knowledge came the awareness [of]... our abilities to solve problems, and above all, the personal value of the RHD.

It appeared that, of all RHD students, the student coordinator may have benefited most. This made us reconsider how we had embedded the notion of self-direction. It is true that, rather than presenting students with a fully-fledged 'curriculum', we had provided them with the opportunity to determine the curriculum. Students did indeed 'teach' each other informally, but we could have tried ways of involving students themselves more in the facilitation process.

Furthermore, in reflecting not only on whether we had reached our objectives and on the relationship between principles and practice but also beyond that on ethical and political concerns, we problematised our original definition of 'peer community' and the boundaries between that community and the larger academic research cultures. We had been thinking of student peers; yet at the same time we invited supervisors and felt that supervisory encouragement and support was important and that the process should enhance relationships between supervisors and students. Although we consulted students continually about their needs in the programme and developed the programme on that basis, we did not consult supervisors about the programme. Did this mean that we were excluding supervisors in a significant way? We believe that we could have given greater consideration to different and overlapping communities that include students. Deem and Brehony (2000, p. 152) in their study thought that cultures relevant to the students in their study were: "the peer cultures of research students themselves qua students, the cultures of research student training, and the cultures of academic disciplines" with "permeable boundaries" but boundaries nonetheless. We see the school academic/research culture as one that is important. We may need to consider how to encourage the intersection of the kind of student culture we were intending to create and the larger academic/research community while retaining the integrity of the student community.

Conclusions

The postgraduate peer support approach contributed to a culture of sharing, with students relating to each other their experiences, their research approaches and techniques, and valuable learning that they had achieved along the way.

In developing future programmes of this kind, it will be important to explore ways of:

- clarifying the sense in which 'community' is to be defined, so that—while the research *student* community is central—it is also recognised as part of a larger community that supports it (this could mean enlisting the greater cooperation of supervisors, consulting with them more extensively from the beginning so that they have greater awareness of and interest in the development of peer support, and seeking their increased involvement as part of the larger scholarly community);
- embedding more fully adult learning principles, including self-direction, with which we had begun, not only by consulting on the focal points of discussion (content) but on the process of the peer support group meetings; and
- strengthening peer-assisted learning by enabling not only the curriculum and the 'teaching' but also the leadership or facilitation roles to be negotiated within a peer support setting.

What we have learned from the research into the peer support programme can inform burgeoning interest in ways of enhancing the RHD community to counter isolation. Our group, unlike many documented examples, is a *student-led* group. If collaboration, peer-assisted learning, and a warm intellectual climate are to be sustained, ways of encouraging such peer support groups to prosper will be necessary. Such groups have the potential to generate behaviours important for future research careers: a collegial sharing of experiences and both self-direction and collaboration, which are complementary. They can enhance learning through the ‘teaching’ role. With supervisor involvement and support, a peer-support group – essentially a research higher student community – can be seen as clearly an integral part of the larger scholarly community within the department or school, and beyond. It may be necessary to visualise the scholarly community as a series of concentric circles in which the strong ‘embeddedness’ of the student community within the larger communities is crucial.

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