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Theme: Developing global citizens: Enhancing the student experience through embedded support and academic services

Sub Theme: Mentoring students across cultures

Non-refereed paper

Title: Mentoring students of different cultural backgrounds

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Full paper

Introduction

This paper follows a narrative pattern because that is what it is: a narrative. It is told as a story: my story. The story is about my experience as a mentor of undergraduate students at two universities in Melbourne, Monash University and La Trobe University. As the paper, and its presentation, follows an experiential thread, I wish to make a disclaimer from the start that the narration is not based on academic research, and thus firm recommendations cannot be made as a result of any analysis, deliberate or otherwise, stated here. In other words, the summation is not academic, but reflective.

Perceptions

Five years ago I started on this journey, at first with La Trobe University, and then also with Monash University, because I found the engagement with students matched with me in their respective mentoring programs, enriching and rewarding, albeit challenging. I joined the two programs thinking that I was knowledgeable enough to cope adequately with the task at hand, and that the preparation to be provided by the universities looked thorough enough. As it turned out, the training was very enjoyable and informative, offering various input such as coaching techniques from Mick Malthouse, and a motivational talk from Harry O'Brien, who shared his experience in volunteer work.

As far as the students, the mentees, were concerned, I had certain expectations of them. My expectations were that the mentees would be

- enthusiastic, as, after all, they had voluntarily joined the program to seek a mentor's guidance
- keen to meet with me and discuss their case once a week or every fortnight, as this was about their future
- mainly Australians as they formed the larger proportion of the student body

- studying similar subjects to what I had studied at university
- interested in pursuing a teaching career (as I had done after graduating from my first degree)
- considering ESL training after a few years of teaching or later in their career (as I had done)
- willing to attend meetings and/or professional development sessions with me at conferences or at meetings of professional associations to which I belong.
- curious about my workplace and colleagues, and even wish to meet some of them.

Reality

In the five years of experience in mentoring undergraduate students, I have become more informed and wiser in the ways of undergraduate students. The reality is that so far I have had only two students who were fully committed and took as much advantage as possible that the highly privileged place in the program offered them. Of the others I found that they led extremely busy lives with study, work, family and travel as well as studying some other courses besides their main degree. Some of them sang in church choirs or had some other hobby that they regularly pursued. These prior commitments left them with little time for me and therefore limited opportunity for them to gain from my experience or input. Of the two with the highest commitment, one of them went on to become the highest Golden Key awardee at La Trobe University, did an Honours year and found volunteer work at the University itself. The other mentee I employed as a teacher at my workplace, and afterwards, the latter won a Dean's award and a scholarship to study a Master degree in Education. These two were success stories; self-motivation on the part of the students with a dosage of my advice resulted in them achieving higher degrees of success than they had expected of themselves.

With the other students, if they put in some measure of effort, they found a certain degree of satisfaction in the program and from my input. In such cases measuring success was rather difficult as it was more subjective and not as obvious as in the high achievers. In my experience, the majority of the students had joined the program with high expectations but found it difficult to commit to the program to for several reasons. This group of students were

- enthusiastic at first but I found it difficult to motivate them to come to all our meetings or to arrive on time. Three of them did not turn up at all, and my only contact with them was by email. With some of them, understandably, an offer of a meal in a restaurant was more motivational than a meeting in my office. In the case of two from the three who had not turned up, replacements, from the waiting list, were found for me.
- keen to meet with me, but to utilise me as a conduit to other sources, for example to gain access to my supervisor or to only use me as a referee to a better part-time job while they were still studying.
- mostly international students although they form less than 10% of the total student population at one of these universities. In fact, in each program 42% or more of the student participants were international students. I even had one mentee who was an Afghan refugee of

Hazara background. Most of my international student mentees were planning to apply for permanent residence in Australia, and wished I could advise them on the type of employment that could contribute to more points towards the success of their PR applications.

- not studying any of the subjects that I had studied as an undergraduate student. They had chosen subjects which were much more interesting than English Language and Literature which I had studied for my first degree. They were studying interesting courses like Archaeology, Anthropology, Politics, International Relations and languages such as Japanese, Spanish or Italian. Nearly all of them had studied overseas in places such as Norway, Mexico, Japan and Italy. Some of them had worked in Borneo, Indonesia and Sabah as well as Japan.
- thinking about doing some sort of volunteer work overseas, mainly helping women and children in under-developed countries. My attempted lure of work with Aboriginal women and children in remote parts of Australia did not sound attractive to a single one of them.
- not really interested in a teaching career to start off with. Some of them were more interested in starting off at the point that I had reached after 20 years, that is in a management position in a tertiary institution.
- not hoping to pursue ESL training and teaching in Australia. Even though I managed to persuade one of them to do CELTA, she went to China to study Chinese on a scholarship. Hopefully, CELTA is useful for her in finding work while she is in China.
- quite well-informed about the importance of regular meetings as well as professional development sessions in a workplace; however, none of them had the time or inclination to join me to observe or participate in any of these with me.
- disinclined to show much interest in the structure of my workplace or what roles my other colleagues played in my work life. This could have been through shyness or lack of time on their part.

I had anticipated that the mentees I would be matched with would naturally come from many different backgrounds; however, I had expected them all to be Australian with some familiarity with the Australian workplace, from their families' and friends' experiences with work. In finding a large number of international students in the mix, especially those with very little knowledge of the Australian workplace culture, my role as a mentor became more challenging. I was required to provide more intensive input than I had anticipated. I perceived that the training from the two universities had equipped me with dealing with domestic students. There was more research required on my part to direct international students to the most current sources from which they could extract information. Some of the questions posed were not for me to respond to as they were for migration agents to tackle as per the advice from DIAC.

Sometimes I felt that the result desired by the student was not achieved, and this made me concerned on their behalf. For example, the student who was an Afghan refugee had a lot of complications in getting his student visa extended. As obtaining visa extension, and ultimately the chance to live in Australia, was of paramount importance in his life at that time, I felt that our conversations were being hijacked by his attempts to resolve issues related to his immediate needs. Finding the right job after completion of his first degree was far from his mind at that point in time.

I also found, at times, that although most of the international students were willing to do volunteer work related to their field of study, for example with Red Cross or World Vision or Oxfam or the Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Centre, it was almost impossible to find these placements (for international students). Preparing for any such program was not an option for international students. The only scenario close enough that I could work towards was to have simulation sessions with my mentees so that if the opportunity presented itself, they would have a fair chance of jumping through the hoops of selection. Only one of my mentees managed to go up to the second rung of the ladder of selection before he was rejected for a volunteer placement. No other student came close enough to achieving their desired placement at the time they required it. I hope some of them, at least, were able to achieve a volunteer placement, close enough to their chosen target, at some time after their mentoring program finished.

Of much more interest to me, related to my past research in how respect is negotiated in different cultures, was observing each mentee and how they related to me as a mentor. After all, the notion of respect differs from one culture to another, and thrown in the mix was the international students' attempts to be as Australian as possible. This led to some interesting, and at times amusing discussions within the mentor group whenever we met. We continue to learn from one another, as mentors and mentees, and we grow wiser.

Conclusion

After five years of being a participant in the mentor program I still feel like a novice. The main reason for this is that each mentee comes with diverse needs. In the case of international students, their needs are more diverse because of their student visa status and cultural differences. From my perspective, being able to find out more about the student and their focus before starting the program would help slightly. Of much more help would be my understanding of the workplace culture from their country of origin. The limitations are mine, not the mentees.