

Paper Title: Online Peer Mentoring discussion Group- “A Practical Solution”

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Abstract:: Online Peer Mentoring discussion Group- “A Practical Solution”

The Online Peer Mentoring discussion group (OPM) at UniSA, is a practical solution used to achieve interaction between international and local students. The OPM is run by current UniSA students from different backgrounds along with the International Student Advisor acting as a moderator. The OPM has been attracting interest from international students, agents, international visitors and other universities around Australia for the last 3 years.

Through the OPM, new students have the opportunity to ask questions about the University, about Adelaide, about accommodation facilities, enrolment, and most importantly, they have the opportunity to make new lasting friendships. The feeling of knowing somebody before setting foot in Adelaide makes the transition for the new students easier and more enjoyable. The OPM has helped many students familiarise themselves with the university and staff before they even get here.

The students also use the OPM and the connections they have made to organise and attend outings and events while they are here which gives them a taste of the Australian culture and its people.

The OPM has been so successful that it is now being adopted by other university groups. UniSA students preparing to go on overseas exchanges, for example, will be using OPM to facilitate their transition process before they go on exchange. The UniSA disability services is also adopting this scheme by allowing students to communicate and interact with other students, share information and provide peer support in a fun and informative fashion.

Key Words: Interaction, internationalisation, peer mentors, student networks

Introduction

Nowadays, everything is rapidly changing. The education sector is not an exception. We need to keep up with the trends and meet the needs of the ever changing educational environment. The growth in international student numbers experienced in the last decade (Kokkinn, B, & Stevenson 2003) has made us proactive and we are constantly looking for ways to use technology in order to help to fill the existing gap among international and local students due to the lack of interaction (Volet and Ang 1998). One possible explanation for the low level of interaction among locals and international students is the language barrier; lack of interest on both parts in want to know about their cultures.

At UniSA it was decided to use the online mode with an Online Peer Mentoring (OPM) discussion group in order to help the new international students with their transition before they arrive in Australia. We believe transition starts before students leave home and this service is part of the pre-departure program offered to new international students. This scheme started as a pilot on only one of the University campuses in Semester 2, 2002. Since then it has grown and now is available university wide. The OPM is part of the services and resources offered by the Flexible Learning Centre at UniSA. This paper is a follow-up report on ‘Meeting the locals online and experience the diversity in

our university' which was delivered at the ISANA 2002 conference by Helen Benzie, Learning Adviser at UniSA.

This paper outlines some strategies developed in order to give new students the opportunity to communicate, interact and be part of the university community before they arrive in Australia. It also reports on findings gathered among the participants and how these findings have been used in order to improve and reshape the OPM without moving away from its original aims.

How does the scheme work?

The OPM is managed by an International Student Adviser, who acts as a moderator. The role includes promoting, supervising, recruiting and training students as mentors for the scheme. All new international students accepted into undergraduate or postgraduate studies at UniSA receive an invitation to be part of the OPM. They are given the opportunity to be part of the wider student community before they even set foot in Adelaide. If a student is interested in being part of the OPM, the moderator who oversees all aspects of the scheme will send the login and instructions on how to use the discussion group, as well as the rules and conditions that are expected to be followed by the participants. This scheme is ongoing and usage reaches a peak two months before the start of the semester. It is not restricted to time and seasons and the mentors are not assigned to particular students. All questions are posted and the mentors answer them. This approach provides a range of perspectives giving the mentees more information and more options.

Who are the mentors?

Mentors are experienced students with knowledge of how the university system works and are willing to dedicate time to help new students even if it means going to great effort to find answers. There are some instances when questions arise beyond the mentors' abilities and they cannot provide an answer. This is when the Moderator takes the responsibility for answering questions. Student mentors also help to create a connection between the students and their prospective program directors, getting them acquainted with their course websites and even checking what is expected of them in the semester. They also give the other students a way to connect and chat with each other. During 2005 many students have made friends and have also found housemates as a result of interacting online.

How are the mentors recruited and trained?

Local and international continuing students are invited to join the OPM. International Student Advisers on all campuses are asked by the Moderator to approach and invite students who have shown interest in extra curriculum activities such as the buddy program, orientation buddies and other cultural activities. From past experience the success of this strategy has ensured the best students for the task of being a mentor. The OPM recruits mentors who enjoy the job, mentors who get satisfaction from helping people.

Once students have been recruited, a four hour training program is scheduled. Experienced student mentors talk about interacting online as mentors and the personal benefits they have received from the experience. The Moderator talks about responsibilities and provides guidelines for successful interaction.

Why the need for a moderator?

It is important to have a moderator in order to ensure the information given out is correct. The Moderator also plays an important role by keeping the discussion going, not only by answering any questions that mentors are unable to answer but also keeping the discussion open as a friendly and positive environment.

What are the benefits for the mentors?

This scheme benefits not only local student mentors but international student mentors as well. It gives them all international perspectives and increases their intercultural awareness and understanding through training and interaction. Mentors receive a certificate of appreciation highlighting the skills gained during their time as OPM mentors which they can add to their portfolios. This is an important outcome because one of the graduate qualities at UniSA is to demonstrate international perspectives as a professional and as a citizen.

How is the on line interaction managed?

Keeping mentors motivated is challenging. It requires time, patience, trust, and overall passion. Recruiting mentors with the ability and the passion to be helpful is an advantage when running a discussion group. It is always important to ensure that the interaction is of high quality and relevant.

Things to keep in mind

- Keep a list of students interested to become a mentor, so you can have a back-up when the other mentors leave or graduate.
- Make sure you praise the mentors and keep the ball rolling by posting interesting messages about coming events and have student focus groups where lunch is provided.
- Discourage students from using their personal emails to continue discussions so the aim of keeping the OPM as an open forum is met.
- Don't expect all student mentors to be active and ready to answer questions at any given time.

Effectively manage monitor-mentor communications by

- Setting aside specific times to monitor e-mails.
- Sending reminders of the role of a mentor if necessary.
- Developing FAQ's (frequently asked questions) for the Web site; and
- Prompting questions by providing news and information relevant to students

How is the OPM promoted?

OPM at UniSA uses multiple venues to advertise and promote the scheme. The initial contact is made by the International Office when a prospective student becomes a 'new student'. The International Office send an invitation to the new students to join the OPM. University staff visiting agents overseas also talk about the OPM and distribute promotional flyers. OPM is also promoted by the student mentors during Orientation and social gatherings. Flyers and emails are sent to local and international students. The international student newsletter has a regular space for mentors or mentees to comment on the OPM. The OPM is also promoted during the all 'buddies' training sessions.

Analysis of the OPM scheme

In terms of numbers in 2003 the OPM recruited 29 Online Peer Mentors, but only 6 were active. 41 commencing international students engaged in the online discussion with peer mentors. The OPM had a total of 460 visits.

In 2004 the OPM recruited 9 Online Peer Mentors and all of them were active. 44 commencing international students engaged in the online discussion with peer mentors. The OPM had a total of 805 visits.

Between January and September 2005 the OPM had 10 very active mentors, and a total of 1634 visits. 36 commencing international students have engaged in the online discussion.

Although the OPM scheme appears to be growing in popularity, we needed to examine its use more closely. To achieve this, a monthly evaluation has been initiated in order to gather information to find

out what the students think, what benefits they have received and what they want from the OPM. This survey is delivered online, and it sits as part of the Discussion group. The moderator has asked the participants to fill the survey in at their convenience.

In the last two weeks of September, which is in a not peak period for student queries at UniSA because it is during a teaching break, 14 students completed the survey. The results are as follows:

- 100% responded in the survey that they used the OPM more than 3 times a month.
- 90 % found the OPM mentors very helpful
- 62% found the OPM has helped them to adjust to UniSA extremely well
- 87.5 % have posted a message on the OPM
- 12.5% have benefited by reading the messages posted by others

In terms of students' perceptions of the Online Peer Mentoring discussion group 'OPM', comments have been very positive. For example:

- *'As a student mentee, I feel that a peer mentor is an excellent resource, a helping hand and a referral service. They provide support, encouragement and information to students. They are like a conduit as they are there to pass information to the students to staff as well as passing on questions to them'.*
- *'The questions are answered by more than one person thereby giving me an opportunity to have different points of view. It is a very exciting page with a lot of upcoming events'.*
- *'Always a receive responses to my postings, the students are very friendly. I can't wait to meet them during orientation'.*
- *"Every time that I am not sure about something, I post a message. Many students respond and that make my day'.*
- *'I just read the messages, and I have learnt a lot. I don't need to ask, everything is there'.*
- *'I decided to post a message because my parents want me to find out more about my courses, and where is better to live'.*
- *'OPM helped me made friends with new people doing the same class as me and others who are just funny and when I got to UNISA I had people to talk to already and I felt like I belonged there. It is a good feeling'.*

Conclusion

It is well known that accomplishing interaction among international and local students is a difficult call. Opportunities for interaction in an online environment are greater, simply because time limitations do not exist and the technology can facilitate different kinds of dialogue.

The OPM at UniSA has proven to be a practical solution when looking for strategies to achieve interaction that helps new international students better adjust to UniSA, the campus community and Australia, through effective online interaction which enhances international students' satisfaction with their university experience. The OPM also aims to serve as a major way of linking local and

international students, the university and the community. OPM promotes a positive cross-cultural environment through social gatherings and focus groups. An example is the 'Meet you mentors activity' after orientation, where Mentors and Mentees meet face-to-face enabling the cybernetic interaction to evolve to a more personal stage sometimes resulting in lasting friendships.

Although the OPM does not involve all new students, its success to date indicates that it will continue to be a part of the pre-departure resources available for international students at UniSA and future studies into its effectiveness are likely to lead to continual improvements.

References

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