

Peer E-Mentoring Podcasts in a Self-Paced Course

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Abstract

This article describes how podcasts from senior students were used as brief peer mentoring tools in an asynchronous, self-paced, text-based, introductory online nursing course. An increasing number of distance educators use peer mentoring approaches to support student success in higher education programs. However, suggestions for implementing peer mentoring in courses where students work alone and at their own pace is limited. Our project illustrates how MP3 audio recordings of students' voices (podcasts) offer advice and encouragement (mentorship) to peers who do not know one another.

Introduction

Peer mentoring can have a positive impact on undergraduate student success in higher education (Budge, 2006; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000; Husband & Jacobs, 2009; Philips, 2009).

Similarly, peer mentoring online or e-mentoring can also have a positive impact on student success (Cavallaro & Tan, 2006; Holland, 2009; Hunt, 2005; Taylor & Zeng, 2008). And, in the field of nursing education, peer mentoring has long been recognized as valuable to student learning (Dennison, 2010; Hansen-Kyle, 2010).

Traditionally, peer mentors offered practical advice and encouragement to new students to help them adapt and feel connected to their learning environment. As Carmichael (2004) explained, by sharing their own process of solving problems, peer mentors can help new students by putting things in perspective rather than being overwhelmed. Peer mentors offer a personal point of view bolstered by the notion that they have “been there and done that” and “survived” (Carmichael 2004). However, in asynchronous, self-paced, text-based online courses, learners work alone and have limited opportunities to interact with fellow students. Due to the independent nature of self-pacing, mentoring relationships seldom develop in these asynchronous online classes. And yet, in nursing education programs, particularly those where vocationally educated practitioners are attending an online university for the first time, practical advice and encouragement from successful peers can be invaluable.

The Project

Our project, implemented in November, 2010, collected and then embedded audio podcast messages of encouragement from students into an online course exploring professional nursing

practice in a Post LPN BN program at a Canadian university. Our research team consisted of a Research Assistant who recently graduated with a master's degree from the university and a PhD prepared primary investigator who teaches at the university. The Post LPN Bachelor of Nursing program is designed to provide vocationally prepared Licensed Practical Nurses with the opportunity to continue their education in nursing in a baccalaureate program that offers flexible modes of course delivery. Some non clinical courses, including the targeted course for this project, are delivered through self paced, asynchronous text-based threaded discussions within a MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) environment. Students work at their own pace individually through a Study Guide and they receive tutor feedback on submitted assignments. Students live all across Canada, usually work full time and can be expected to manage heavy family responsibilities. While optional discussion forum areas and chat rooms are available for learner to learner interaction through text based forums, students have limited opportunities to actually listen to the voices of peers. The course is completed early in the program and is intended to assist Licensed Practical Nurses transition to the role of Registered Nurse. Aspects of their professional socialization can include adjusting to the role of being a student in an online university program.

This educational innovation project, part of a larger program of research examining Post LPN BN professional socialization received ethical approval from the university. Participants for the project were senior students. Twelve female participants were recruited by sending an e-mailed Letter of Invitation to fifty male and female students enrolled in their final cluster of courses. The Letter of Invitation invited senior students to call a toll free number, any time of the day or night and leave a message of encouragement to students just beginning their program. Messages

were recorded on a telephone answering machine and audio digital recorder. Senior students were invited to share the strategies and ideas about “what worked for me” in their program.

When participants telephoned the toll free number, they were prompted by the answering machine recording to verbalize their consent to having their voices recorded and then to briefly share their message of encouragement. Messages were collected on a digital voice recorder over a three week time frame.

The digital phone recorder created MP3 audio files that were transferred via cable to a computer and played using Windows media player. The audio file messages were embedded into the introductory course in the MOODLE environment as podcasts. Anecdotally, new students reported to their class tutors that the peer e-mentoring podcast messages offered useful strategies and helped them feel “as though I’m not all alone doing this course.” Unfortunately, as students seldom complete their course evaluation forms, empirical data on the effectiveness of the messages is unavailable.

The e-mentoring podcasts were transcribed and both the audio and transcribed files were imported into QSR International NVIVO 9, a qualitative data organization program. Using NVIVO, the research team reviewed the files for repetitive categories and established the following two overarching themes. First, comments offering practical advice were identified. Second, comments offering encouragement were identified. The themes were validated by

independent reviews of the transcripts by the researchers and confirmed with participants.

Verbatim comments are italicized.

Peer E-mentoring Podcasts

Messages of Advice

When I start a course, I always look ahead. I look at what the course requirements are. I look at the assignments. I kind of try and prioritize what I need to do for that week, Monday morning or sometime Sunday evening and that gives me my little goals, my little, attainable goals.

I set [a specific] amount of time per week just to work on my projects and my papers.

Use calendars and date plans – get everything organized. And stay with your plan.

You do feel alone and isolated. You don't have [other] students to bounce things off of, so I can't [advise] you enough to use the tutors. Keep up the lines of communication, even if it's every couple of weeks, just check in and tell them how you're doing and they can give you some really valuable words of encouragement.

Send e-mails to your tutors. Don't be afraid to contact them.

Stay involved with the [optional class discussion] forums.

The forums and the coffee room discussions are a great way to communicate with fellow students and you'll learn some really valuable information from those students.

Get out of the house. I found that when I really needed to get stuff done or I wasn't feeling like I wanted to work, I could always find something in my house that needed to be done - dishes, or laundry, or taking the dog for a walk. There were too many excuses so [I needed to] get outside the house to study. I used the computers in a quiet area at work or went to the library.

Vent to friends, jog, work out at the gym – it helps ease the stress.

Set reward goals. Once I've completed an assignment, my reward is to take the next day off from schoolwork and do something I enjoy. So after I submit a paper for marking, the next day, I do what I enjoy – hiking, taking my dogs for a walk or reading a book –but no assignments.

Get out with friends and family [to] kind of just unload and bring you back fresh.

Messages of Encouragement

Learning how to learn can be a little bit daunting and intimidating, but my experience thus far has been the support system is amazing so congratulations if you're just starting. Keep up the good work if you're still working towards your goals and have a lot of fun. Bye for now.

Always look at the positive. Don't look at how much is left to do. Look at how far you've come and say- I've done this. It's only taken me X amount of time. I can do this. I've got this left to do. There's light at the end of the tunnel and I can get there.

Hope this helps and I just want to say good luck to anybody that's just beginning. It's a fantastic program and I've enjoyed everything I've learnt thus far. Bye.

I have not spoken to one student that did not have some kind of stumbling blocks. ... You will feel overwhelmed and alone at times, which is completely normal. You will experience the feelings of "I just want to be done already!" ... [My message to you is that] my experience has been positive and I'm in my final practicum.

You will probably go through phases like I did as you progress. There were times where I felt very discouraged and I felt completely overwhelmed. I felt that I couldn't do it. But, I just kept plodding along and there was a certain point when you know you can't go back. You just keep plodding along and you'll find that near the end, there is definitely a light at the end of the tunnel.

And just have fun! Really, have fun. It's a lot of fun. I hope this [message] helps somebody-hang in there.

Discussion

These messages of advice and encouragement from senior students, which were sent to new Post LPN to BN students through podcasts, offer a snapshot of what e-mentoring can look like in an asynchronous, self-paced, text-based, introductory online nursing course. Vocationally trained nurses beginning university studies may lack the confidence needed to succeed in higher education (Melrose, 2010). While more extensive mentoring opportunities between senior and junior students could be expected to increase learner confidence, Post LPN to BN students have multiple demands on their time. Many work full-time, study full-time and manage heavy family responsibilities, leaving them with little inclination to engage in social interaction in their asynchronous classes. In fact, some may intentionally chose self-paced courses to upgrade their credentials in order to focus exclusively on required learning tasks. Thus, listening to brief practical suggestions that peers found were valuable can begin to help these adult learners feel connected to others in their program without requiring further time commitments.

Parsloe and Wray (2004) viewed the role of peer mentors in undergraduate programs as coaches who assist new students with time management, study skills and goal setting. Traditionally in both face to face and online higher education programs, the peer mentoring role included ongoing and sustained communication between mentors and mentees. Our project describes an

alternative approach that is particularly relevant to self-paced courses. Although no relationship exists between the senior student mentors and the new student mentees, the podcast messages fulfill Parsloe and Wray's (2004) essential mentoring functions of advising students about time management, study skills and goal setting. New students can turn to the e-mentor podcasts at any time of day or night to hear practical advice. By simply clicking on the MP3 files embedded as podcasts in their MOODLE course, new students can hear the friendly supportive voices of peers encouraging them to press on.

Conclusion

This paper described a project where peer e-mentoring podcasts of encouragement from senior Post LPN to BN students were collected by telephone and then embedded in an introductory asynchronous, self paced text based course. The messages were presented in two categories; first, comments offering practical advice were identified. Second, comments offering encouragement were identified. Practical advice comments included suggestions to look ahead to plan assignments, set time aside each week, organize with date plans, check in bi-weekly with tutors, e-mail tutors often, use optional class discussion forums, find work space outside the home, set reward goals and get away with family and friends. Encouragement comments included affirming that learning to learn is daunting, that looking at how far new students have already come can help, that the program is enjoyable, that feeling overwhelmed and discouraged is normal and that they should 'hang in here.'

Our educational innovation extends existing research by illustrating a new approach to online peer mentoring that is particularly fitting in self-paced courses geared to adult learners. By embedding podcasts in their MOODLE course, we provided new students with the actual voices of successful peers who wanted to share their advice and encouragement. This educational innovation may be of interest to other educators who teach in asynchronous courses.

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