Redefining the learning space: Developing peer mentoring in the enterprise curriculum

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Abstract
This account of practice seeks to demystify the entrepreneurship classroom and to provide practical insights into the successful introduction and embedding of a multi-level peer mentoring scheme. Over a 5-year period, peer mentoring has been embedded in an undergraduate enterprise curriculum. This has posed challenges to a number of taken-for-granted assumptions about the enterprise classroom. The role of the tutor in the classroom was redefined; the roles of both colleagues and students were questioned. The accepted rules and norms of the learning environment were placed under considerable strain. It was found that both colleagues and students had very clearly defined expectations of one another and their respective roles: these proved difficult to change. The article recounts the journey, and how the organisers learned to accept and embrace the difficulties faced. Hygiene factors such as timetabling and communication were highly important in allowing the interactions to take place, as were socialisation and facilitation. The mistakes made are also recounted so that they can be avoided by other practitioners.

Keywords
Enterprise classroom, enterprise education, learning space, peer mentoring

The Business Enterprise Management (BEM) course began at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in September 2007. I was appointed specifically to work on the course, so I have been involved with it from the start. Over the next 7 years the course remained popular with students and organically developed an applied teaching and experiential learning approach. In 2015 a major revalidation took place, forcing us to consider the future direction of the course and wider business programme. I was heavily involved in that process as programme leader and I admit to using my influence to develop enterprise teaching across the wider programme. A decision was subsequently taken to include an element of enterprise education in all business courses (enterprise had previously been located solely in the BEM course).

While this was an exciting development, it was also a threat to the identity of the BEM course and forced myself and colleagues to examine what we were trying to achieve in an enterprise course. We were looking to make a distinctive offering to prospective students, and to develop confident and resourceful students who would be able to act on their own initiative. In the past we had used reflection as a tool for assisting students to consider their role in their own learning experiences and how those experiences affected their personal development. While reflection clearly had its place, we were now also looking for another approach, and we decided that peer mentoring offered us a practical and robust opportunity. We now have a full 4-year cycle in which the level 4 (first year) mentee has become the level 6 (final year) mentor.

This account of practice is presented as a reflection of our learning and experiences.

Reconsidering the enterprise classroom: Developing new approaches

In developing a distinctive course offering I spent a lot of time thinking about the cohorts I had taught in the past. The BEM course had been seen in the Business School as leading on the use of live consultancy projects; employer participation in setting coursework challenges; guest lectures;

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participating in research and field trips. Bringing the workplace into the classroom and taking students out into clients' workspaces had given the course a particular 'feel' which, I felt, distinguished it from the other business courses in the programme. We treated the classroom as a meeting space, somewhere we would gather and share – but the wider campus and city centre were much more exciting and engaging; a learning space where enterprise was endemic. I considered how engaged the students were when we sent them out of the classroom to look for inspiration to operate on a wider canvas – for example, to make a video or bring back an object – remembering with horror when one group 'appropriated' the fairy from the top of the university's Christmas tree!

This approach was not always popular with students – the familiar is a comfortable place and the physical classroom has four walls. We found challenging that mindset as difficult as any practical challenge we faced. Over the previous years I had identified how different student groups had developed their own personalities, which could be highly influential on student attainment and experience. I remembered with fondness the class that cohered around its support for a disabled student and the maturity and sheer good-humoured humanity that it developed when working together to ensure that their colleague was included in everything they did. In developing the BEM course, I had to work out a way to facilitate a repetition of this experience.

It appeared to me that, if they were encouraged to be confident and resourceful, students would learn far more from interacting with each other than they would from us as academics. This forced me to consider my own position and the role I played in creating the environment where learning would take place. Peer mentoring offered the chance to formalise those interactions and to integrate them into the learning experience. Goodlad (2013) argues that peer mentoring may have a greater impact on student learning and academic success than classroom teaching. One of the limiting factors I faced with regard to this interaction was the relative homogeneity of a typical undergraduate cohort. At SHU, a typical cohort will be largely from the UK, with about a third of those from the Sheffield City Region and two-thirds from elsewhere in the country. There will be a few overseas students and the occasional mature student, but most undergraduate cohorts at SHU and on the BEM course lack life experience and knowledge, which limits their learning.

Making a case for peer mentoring

We have found a way of overcoming that last-mentioned weakness by developing a peer mentoring intervention in BEM that encourages learning, develops new skills and, by including mixed cohorts of first- and final-year students, creates greater heterogeneity. Peer mentoring brought us several benefits. It helped to make the course distinctive, as very few undergraduate courses include mentoring; it challenged students' notions of a transactional dyadic staff–student relationship; and it built on existing staff expertise. It also continued to challenge students' preconceptions of a transactional learning space.

Peer mentoring has long been a feature of the SHU student experience, but it has so far been aimed at students making the transition into higher education. I considered that it had been used to perpetuate traditional notions of the learning space – getting students comfortable – and we wanted to use it to disturb such preconceptions. The course team wanted to do something different by bringing mentoring into the curriculum as a practice and core skill. We felt that mentoring was an enterprising behaviour, which also helps to develop confident and resourceful students. The revalidation gave us the opportunity to achieve this. We decided that we wanted to develop peer mentoring across the course – not as an extra-curricular or co-curricular activity, but as part of a mainstream module. Peer mentoring now occurs in two modules of the BEM course. All peer mentoring takes place as part of the contact strategy of the relevant enterprise module.

Practicalities, making it work

The first approach was to validate two new modules, one at level 4 and one at Level 6, which would work with complementary learning outcomes and assessment tasks. On a practical level this gave us the opportunity for collaboration between students on the same course but at different levels of study. This is an unusual practice in most educational settings, and probably especially so in a large process-oriented university like SHU. University processes such as timetabling and, certainly, academic information systems did not like a non-standard delivery.

Assessment was one issue: there are two assessment tasks, a group client-sponsored project and a reflection on the mentoring process. By treating mentoring as a skill development and including the process as part of a reflective account, we helped to mitigate the consequences of any failure in the mentoring process. Both level 4 and level 6 cohorts work on the same client consultancy project. This is a live group project: a current business problem encountered by a local business. Both cohorts attend the same client briefing session, which usually takes the form of a client presentation followed by a Q&A session. The level 4 students act as research assistants for the level 6 students. The initial secondary research conducted by level 4 students forms the basis of their assessment task. This initial research is then used by the level 6 students as the basis for the development of recommendations to the client. The level 6 students in their turn act as mentors to the level 4 students, assisting them in refining and developing the initial research for their assessment task – a virtuous cycle.

This brings us to the second major issue: developing relationships. Level 6 students create self-formed groups of two or three members. These groups are then assigned two or three level 4 students to act as research assistants by the level 4 module leader. At the beginning of the semester the level 4 and level 6 modules run independently. After about week 3 we run formal timetabled sessions for which level 4 and level 6 students are in the same room at the same time. This has been an important element in the success of our peer mentoring strategy. Initially, we underestimated the amount of time it would take the two groups to work together effectively (I mention the problems this caused below). Pitney and Ehlers (2004) suggest that, as mentors, university students tend to be more successful when mentoring sessions are built into the timetable, and this was certainly our experience. We took this advice; module tutors were in the room as the sessions represented formal class contact time but they took a backseat, encouraging, advising and answering technical questions rather than leading the sessions.

Problems and pitfalls: What we learned

The idea of peer mentoring as an integral part of the learning process was not universally welcomed; there was some resistance from colleagues. With the embedding of peer mentoring in the curriculum, the enterprise classroom sometimes became an uncomfortable place. We had expected some uneasiness from the students but we were less prepared for some of the reactions from staff. At level 6 some colleagues were concerned that the peer mentoring would get in the way of the live client-sponsored project, which they considered to be the more important part of the module. A few colleagues were unsure about how it would affect their role as module tutors. As discussed below, it transpired that these fears did have some foundation. Some of our more didactic colleagues would ask, 'But what are they actually learning'? They wanted a lesson plan, some learning objectives and preferably a task or two. Mentoring in the enterprise classroom does pass some of the responsibility from tutors to students, and so colleagues who were used to leading a session found taking a back seat uncomfortable. Colleagues wanted to intervene when they could see things going wrong, rather than wait and let the groups overcome their own problems. Some felt that they were abrogating their role; occasionally visibly nervous and stressed, they sought reassurance and validation from me. One colleague commented to me that one of the hardest things for a tutor to do in a classroom is nothing.

Another issue that seemed, at least initially, to be a problem was the relative similarity in age and experience of the mentors and mentees. We did our research, engaged with the literature and we were reassured. Angelique et al. (2002) suggest that peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age, experience and

power. Terrion and Leonard (2007) argue that peer mentoring is characterised by confirmation, counselling, role-modelling and friendship. In a situation in which an 18-year-old first-year undergraduate was working with a 22- to 24-year-old final-year student, the age difference seemed to us, as tutors, to be a good fit. But the students felt very differently. I spoke at some length to Susan, a 24-year-old level 6 undergraduate. She had never really considered age as a factor in learning relationships, and she considered herself as young. She had a job, but everyone at work was older than her. The peer mentoring had brought her face to face for the first time in her life with the need to learn with people who were younger than her. A quiet, thoughtful student, Susan had rarely put herself forward in group work, but the peer mentoring had forced her into a different situation. We discussed her confusion and her fears; how it felt to be seen as an older, more mature, more responsible member of a group. She was confused and had difficulty actually articulating why she felt the way she did.

The live consultancy project includes a client briefing, and it is on this occasion that the level 4 and level 6 students meet each other for the first time. In considering the enterprise learning space, we should not underestimate this seemingly mundane encounter. Anecdotally, students have written about how strange they found the meeting – about how new and almost overwhelming it can be for the level 4 students to be in the same room as level 6 students, who are between 3 and 5 years older than them. This is something they have not been used to in their previous scholastic experience: most undergraduate cohorts have remained with a year group, often the same year group, throughout their schooling. Thus working with students even just a few years older constitutes an entirely new learning experience. It made the level 4 students nervous and shy and so they were particularly passive, finding conversation with the level 6 students difficult to initiate and engage in. For the tutor, it was hard not to intervene, and to stand back and observe their awkwardness. Kolb and Kolb (2005) contend that learning space is not necessarily physical and goes beyond the teacher and the classroom to include a 'known' socialised environment which has its rules and norms. Peer mentoring broke down the socialised pattern that students had been used to throughout their education and they found it very uncomfortable.

In the early days a great deal of time was spent formalising the peer mentoring within the curriculum and course structure and not enough time was spent considering the actual operational process in terms of its impact on mentors, mentees and staff. Colvin (2007) writes about the need for adequate socialisation of participants, suggesting that peer mentoring requires training and support for all concerned. I feel we neglected this. Storrs et al. (2008) argue that, if it is to be successful, peer mentoring requires clarity and consensus with regard to roles: initially, we failed to leave enough time to fulfil these requirements, and I did not

provide an adequate lead. Too late in the process we realised that we had failed to 'sell' its benefits in terms of the skills it imparted to students, enhancing their own learning and employability.

To overcome some of our initial problems, we built on the notion of an unequal power relationship between the two cohorts. This resulted from the above-mentioned confusion and awkwardness of the younger cohort, who struggled to define their own relationships quickly enough as no one took charge. We subsequently briefed level 6 students to develop ice-breaker activities, asking them to consider ideas about group formation dynamics and to see themselves as responsible for developing the group relationship, whatever they might choose that to be. This strategy led to more effective groups and greater engagement by the level 4 students. Again, it challenged the notion of the traditional classroom, especially for the level 4 students – here, their work was being directed by other students, not by tutors, and they were researching, they were not being taught. Peer mentoring gave the students power and responsibility and a role over the course of a series of seminars. The better students relished that opportunity and the freedom it offered. However, the weaker groups, those without the interpersonal skills or drive to act on their own initiative, encountered problems that they frequently shied away from.

We have encountered many problems. In all the peer mentoring interventions participation has been variable, especially at level 4. To be successful, simply participating is not enough; as Tremblay and Rodger (2003) identify, 'active engagement' is necessary and this has not always happened. Level 6 students, mindful of their degree classification have been concerned about the time commitment. They have displayed very transactional behaviours, wanting to get the job done as quickly as possible. Some also expressed dissatisfaction with the role of the module tutor as facilitator; they would have preferred us to take on a more interventionist role. They felt it was the responsibility of the tutors to act as mediators and to sort out group problems. Their main concerns were the lack of engagement of level 4 students and who took responsibility for that situation. As facilitators we devolved this responsibility to the level 6 students, which led a few to suggest, generally in a good-humoured way, that module tutors were 'having an easy ride' or 'letting them do all the work'. However, the idea that tutors were having an easy ride and problems with level 4 engagement did make their way into the module evaluation and student-voice feedback and were picked up at a departmental level when they were mentioned in National Student Survey (NSS) comments.

We had introduced mentoring as a means of developing confident and resourceful students. As a result of formalised criticisms, through student-voice and NSS comments, I felt the need to defend the peer mentoring as a teaching innovation, but we were not trying to be deliberately

innovative: we believed it was a means to an end, not an end in itself. With the introduction of full student fees, the NSS began to play an increasingly important role in our departmental and university reporting. An underlying university meta-narrative of classroom innovation was replaced by one of student satisfaction. All module leaders had to be mindful of the impact on student satisfaction; student attainment and the reputational dangers that a poor student experience would produce. I wrote earlier about our desire to challenge the notion of the classroom as a discrete space protected by four walls, a known and safe place. In my experience, however, 'unusual', 'different', 'non-standard' are not in line with the current narrative. As a result the module has come under scrutiny, and I have had to use my influence on a number of occasions to justify the continued use of peer mentoring in the curriculum.

Time and experience have overcome many of the initial problems. We now have level 6 students who were themselves level 4 mentees in the peer mentoring role. Having gone the full-cycle, level 6 students are encouraged to consider their development and review their learning journey. Reflective accounts are frequently poignant; level 6 students refer back to their experience at level 4 and write of meeting their former selves.

It has taken this full cycle to successfully embed peer mentoring in our enterprise curriculum. Our primary aim was to develop confident and resourceful students, and I believe that peer mentoring, in challenging accepted practice, has helped to create these traits in our students. The module has, I believe, challenged notions of the enterprise classroom and what a learning space should be. However, I also wanted to create course distinctiveness, and I am not sure we have achieved that. I have been slow to build on the achievements and really use the peer mentoring to promote the course internally or externally.

Enterprise educators wishing to emulate our experience need to be mindful of two overriding factors. The first concerns the formal process of linking modules with similar learning outcomes and contact strategies. Timetabling joint sessions has proved to be difficult and frustrating, but essential to participation and success. A complementary assessment task has proved invaluable in securing the active participation of level 6 students. Second, but just as important, is the recognition that mentoring challenges the student's own perceptions of the learning environment. Students expecting to be taught by a tutor are required to learn from each other and, for many, this challenges the expectations they have of the enterprise classroom. We learnt to accept this factor and cautiously to embrace it.

While the initiative remains a challenge, the difficulty is significantly compensated when we read the touching insights and testimonies that have emerged from personal reflection.

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