Love Actually: A Reflection on the Need for Pedagogical Love in Peer Learning Programs

Key Words

Love, peer learning

Abstract

Evaluation feedback from students and Student Mentors who facilitate our peer learning programs at Victoria University have been predominantly positive. However, in 2016 a negative shift in Student Mentor attitudes became apparent. This shift was undetected by formal evaluations but sensed intuitively in our teaching and engagement with Student Mentors. It had become more difficult to engage Student Mentors beyond the basics of their roles, with few of them willing to be flexible with their time or engage with others more than was necessary. Students Mentors seemed to view their roles as opportunities for employment, showing little interest to commit to our broader mission of making a difference to students' lives. These issues did not affect all Student Mentors or programs but they were present and we experienced them as real and as troubling. In response to these difficulties, and reflecting on twenty years' experience of running student peer learning programs at VU, we asked what had gone unnoticed or unaddressed that had resulted in this? The programs had always had a strong foundation in meaningful, appropriate educational theories and frameworks such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), collaborative learning (Barkley, Cross, Major, 2005) and Student Mentor development (Hammill, Best and Anderson, 2015). Furthermore, evaluation data demonstrated that programs were consistently positively affecting student learning, student success and students' sense of belonging to the institution. Nevertheless we were left with a sense that our programs and Student Mentors had somehow lost their "generosity, enthusiasm and energy" (McCormack and Best, 2009). Patience (2008) provided a possible explanation for why this might have occurred. He explains how utilitarian education "responds to the wishes of higher education's clients" (Neem, 2013) and serves to isolate individuals while encouraging relationships based "on a calculation…about what use they will be for each other: what benefit…may be gained from the relating" (Patience, 2008:57). Student Mentors were valuing the opportunity to earn money on campus and therefore gain important employment experience. The majority of Student Mentors related to the staff in the hope they would be potential referees for future employment opportunities after graduation. While these are of course valid reasons for relating to their roles and to the staff who teach them, their functionary, utilitarian nature felt disappointing. Why had this happened and was it possible to fix? Perhaps due to institutional pressures or a changing student population, it is possible that somehow we did not pay enough attention to the need for 'pedagogical love' (Haavio, 1948; van Mannen, 1991) in our teaching and other work with our Student Mentors. Pedagogical love is a "specific teaching attitude" (Määttä and Uusiatutti, 2011) that "starts from the premise that human beings are fundamentally emotional creatures, and that intellect and will can often be secondary drivers of interest" (Stehlik, 2014). This Pecha Kucha will highlight the innovative strategies implemented throughout 2017 to put pedagogical love into practice within our peer learning programs at VU.

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