The VU Engineering Online Study Space: Examining the limits and benefits of an online student peer mentoring program.

Key Words

peer mentoring online Victoria University Engineering STEM OSS VU Trident

Abstract

In 2016 Victoria University created an online peer mentoring space designed to broaden the assistance already provided to engineering students through a face-to-face peer mentoring program known as Trident. The VU Engineering Online Study Space (OSS) is the most recent service to be part of the Trident peer mentoring program at VU. The OSS was initially planned to work within the socio-cultural theoretical model of online peer assistance outlined by Susan Edwards and Jane Bone, in which an online platform can serve to promote learning through social interaction (Edwards & Bone, 2012). In recent years it has been argued that if used correctly, virtual peer mentoring spaces have the potential to succeed in providing students with the social environment necessary to effectively learn (Huijser, Kimmins, & Evans, 2008; Keppell, Au, Ma, & Chan, 2006; McLuckie & Topping, 2004; Wiley, 2001). What was discovered in the creation and adaption of the OSS was that an online space could not, by itself, provide extensive assistance to students while adhering to the socio-cultural theories which underpin peer support. The OSS's success is due to its being one part of a broader program that also offers traditional, face-to-face assistance. The Trident program is designed so that VU engineering students can connect with peer mentors who are present to assist them in core first-year units (Peer Assisted Tutorials) as well as in collaborative drop-in spaces (the Study Space) which students can attend voluntarily throughout semester. The recent addition of the OSS has meant that students can also access peer support when unable to attend campus. It has enabled Trident's peer mentors to offer limited advice and direction to a wider sphere of students seeking help with engineering. In doing so, the OSS has helped to create connections between students and peer mentors that may have not otherwise existed, and provided a platform in which peer mentors can encourage students to meet them in the physical Study Space for more socially engaged and academically extensive assistance. There were many practical and pedagogical challenges that surfaced while creating and operating the OSS. Establishing an appropriate online space that could allow students and peer mentors the ability to effectively discuss complex equations proved difficult. This issue has led to the OSS being more directive than would be the case in face-to-face interactions and therefore hampered attempts to embed the core peer mentoring philosophy of social constructivism. The adaptations made to correct these issues have relied on the face-to-face peer mentoring services provided by the Trident program. This paper will detail the practical and pedagogical issues encountered in creating an online peer mentoring space, as well as the strategies used to overcome them in order to construct a beneficial and wide-reaching online peer mentoring service. Chief among its findings is that in order for online peer mentoring to succeed, it is necessary that it connects with traditional, face-to-face mentoring services.

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