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Carol J. Everhard, (formerly) School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Corresponding author: everhard@enl.auth.gr

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Implementing a Student Peer-Mentoring Programme for Self-Access Language Learning

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Abstract

While language advising is nowadays considered an essential element in ensuring the effective use of self-access facilities, not all institutions have a budget which can support such a service. Student peer-mentoring partnerships can provide an alternative, with benefits to be derived by mentors, mentees, teachers and institutions alike. What will be described is an attempt to draw on the power of peer dynamics in a self-access context, out of the classroom, over a three-year period. The participating mentees were drawn from the author's first year, second semester undergraduate Language Mastery II (LM II) course, who were teamed up with mentors from the third or fourth year, second semester, specialist undergraduate applied linguistics course on Self-Access and Foreign Language Learning.

Bringing together students from the two courses provided younger and less academically literate learners with more personalised care and attention than the teacher/author of both courses could provide in the time available, and was conducive to sharing responsibility for learning, encouraging social autonomy (Benson & Cooker, 2013; Murray, 2014). The sense of cooperation, trust and confidentiality made both sides identify more strongly with the learning community to which they belonged. Learners were encouraged to think 'out of the box' in terms of self-access and could flit between the limited resources provided in the 'walled garden' of the compact departmental resource centre and the 'public park', with the mix of resources and technologies they used in their everyday lives (Reinders, 2012). What was of particular interest was how learners overcame the obstacles and barriers of space, time and even geographical location and created their own unique tailor-made self-access environments and learning pathways.

Keywords: mentoring, peer dynamics, self-access language learning, resource centre, social autonomy, learning pathways

The nature of self-access resources means that they are often regarded as something of a luxury. In order to justify their expense and running costs, those involved in the enterprise are often required to produce evidence of self-access resource efficiency and effectiveness (Gardner & Miller, 1999). Finding the necessary evidence can prove challenging and the focus can often centre on the material aspects rather than the human elements in the overall self-access experience (Everhard, 2012). In times of economic stringency, self-access personnel may well be the first cuts to be made and self-access managers are then forced to innovate if they wish their resource centre to succeed on a shoe-string budget (Papadima-Sophocleous, 2013).

What will be described here is how, in a Greek higher education setting involving English majors, the various limitations of a resource centre, in terms of its restricted staffing, space and opening hours, led to creative and innovative exchanges of knowledge and experience between students, through a peer-mentoring programme.

Utilising Peer Dynamics

Peers have long been recognised in second language acquisition literature as a valuable resource. Socio-constructivist approaches to language learning emphasize the fact that peers can provide useful scaffolding for their sometimes younger and less-experienced peers. As reviewers and assessors of writing and oral skills, peers can provide valuable and honest feedback and suggestions for improvement (Chen, 2006, Everhard, 2015). In a self-access setting also, peers can provide fellow-students with help in finding materials and can also create materials which can be used by peers (Malcolm & Majed, 2013). Even more importantly, peers can be offered roles and responsibilities usually associated with teachers and self-access managers, as advisors to their peers (Kao, 2012).

The key difference between the case described here and that given by Kao is that it involves mentoring rather than advising. Hargreaves (2010) and Sengupta and Leung (2002) make clear the significant distinction between these two activities. Firstly, a mentoring relationship is one between equals and is therefore not hierarchical. Each party brings to the table expertise of a different kind. Secondly, the dialogue shared between mentors and their mentees is an activity in which they “construct or co-construct knowledge with their clients” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 107). Thus, the relationship is one based on cooperation, trust and mutual regard and each learns and develops in different ways, so that mentees are enabled at one and the same time to realise their potential and fulfil their aspirations (Garvey & Langridge, 2006). Each gives and also takes from the relationship, making it equally beneficial to all. Miller (1986, p. 2) makes the point that this type of relationship which is “grounded in mutuality” results in “the empowerment of all the people involved”.

It was an interest in exploring the possibilities of peer-mentoring in a non-classroom-based but self-access context that prompted me to experiment with two quite different groups of learners who were majoring in English philology.

The Context

Students entering the School of English (SOE) at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, were generally aged between 17-19, having completed 6 years of primary and 6 years of

secondary education. Students were obliged to have an English proficiency level of around B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference scales, a level much lower than that required to follow courses in the SOE.

Second semester courses included a compulsory course called Language Mastery II, which met for four hours a week and was concerned with argumentative and persuasive discourse. Students were generally not accustomed to exercising critical thinking or taking responsibility for their learning, having come through a system of education dominated by spoon-feeding and test-taking. Prior to university entrance, learners focused on their main subjects of study, to the detriment of their English, resulting in attrition of which they were often unaware. Some of these students became mentees on the mentoring programme.

Students taking my Self-access and Foreign Language Learning course in the second semester of their third or fourth year, on the other hand, had a more realistic picture of their language abilities, and had been exposed to a wide range of courses. Their reasons for undertaking the course varied considerably, often depending on the other Applied Linguistics courses on offer, or timetabling. It would be fair to say that unless the students had already taken courses with me, they were unlikely to know what self-access was and were often oblivious to the existence of a resource centre, albeit small, within the SOE. It was from this class that the mentors were recruited.

The Mentoring Programme in Action

The programme was not one which was carefully planned and executed with pre-determined numbers of students involved over a specified period of time, but rather developed in makeshift fashion through the mutual desire of students to find solutions to their various problems with respect to aspects of language, language skills, use of technology, etc. The programme ran for three years, from 2007 to 2010.

The self-access course, from which the mentors came, consisted of three contact hours per week, with emphasis on both the theory and practice of autonomy and self-access. This combination was reflected in course grades, with 60% awarded to a final course exam and 40% attributed to the satisfactory completion of a self-access project. Mentoring became an option for a self-access project in the year 2007-2008. Until then, Self-access Language Learning (SALL) materials production, had been the only project option.

Mentors and mentees were introduced to each other at the end of an LM II class and through discussion managed to select each other in accordance with their academic interests,

similar availability in their class schedules, which was not always easy, and sometimes a shared hometown from which they commuted.

Before the programme commenced, I met separately with mentors and mentees and explained the principles and ideas behind the mentoring programme. Mentors initially received information about the mentoring programme through announcements in class and once formally committed to the programme were invited to a 60-minute training session. Small groups of mentors met in the Resource Centre. The sessions were designed to boost mentors' confidence by further defining their role, making them realize that they could draw on their own knowledge and experience as a student in the SOE and that together with their mentees, they would create a pathway (involving steps or stages) through an area of knowledge or expertise to which the mentee(s) sought access.

It was made clear that it was not the job of the mentors to teach, but rather they should act as the mentees' Sherpa guide over difficult terrain, which would enable mentees to overcome particular difficulties in their university learning careers thus-far.

Mentors were given practical information about the opening hours and staffing arrangements of the Resource Centre. They were made aware of the full range of materials available (since some were locked up and hidden from view), introduced to the departmental Computer Network for on-line access to useful sources, if they were not already users, and they were informed of my office hours, in case some further consultation should prove necessary, or some difficulty in the mentoring process were to arise. Mentors were each given a Profile Card, a Learner Contract and a Mentoring Report Sheet (see Appendices A, B and C), on which they could maintain records of meetings and materials used. Mentors were advised that they could make use of the Resource Centre and Computer Network, the SOE Departmental Library (or any other departmental library), the Main University Library, the faculty coffee bar, their homes, or anywhere else they deemed appropriate for meetings, depending on the mentee's goals. Mentor contact with mentees could be by land-line, mobile phone, e-mail or personal pre-arranged meeting.

Mentors and mentees were allowed flexibility to select whether they would work one-to-one, or in another combination of their choosing, such as one mentor with two mentees, or a single mentee or pair of mentees could have two or more mentors (working as a team) at their disposal. The only regulation imposed was that very careful records of mentoring meetings had to be kept since the mentors on the programme would receive a grade for the work completed as the practical component of their self-access course (worth up to 40% of their total grade). During a semester which lasted between 10 and 12 weeks, mentors were

expected to have a minimum of 7 or 8 meetings with their mentees. At the end of the semester, both mentors and mentees were invited to complete a questionnaire (with questions specific to mentoring or being mentored) in order to give their opinion of the mentoring programme, its impact on them and usefulness to them. Some mentors also submitted voluntary reports on their experiences.

Table 1 shows the total number of students in each of the courses for the years 2007-2010, and the total number of mentees and mentors for each particular year.

Table 1: Participants in the Mentoring Programme

Year	LM II course		Self-access (applied linguistics) course			n ²
	n ¹	Mentees	Mentors	Materials Producers	Resource Centre Organisers	
2006-2007	29	n/a	n/a	90	n/a	90
2007-2008	30	13	16	62	n/a	78
2008-2009	53	6	8	16	22	46
2009-2010	28	4	4	7	19	30

n/a = not applicable n¹ = total of students taking LM II n² = total of students taking S-A course

In the first year of the mentoring programme (2007-2008), as can be seen in Table 1, of the 78 students attending the SALL course, 62 opted to be materials producers and 16 selected to become mentors. As stated previously, in most cases, mentors and mentees succeeded in matching up with each other. In a few cases, I acted as the go-between and match-maker, but it was the learners themselves who determined the number, frequency and place of meetings according to their own needs and preferences.

In the second and third years of the programme, unfortunately, the Resource Centre hours of opening were drastically reduced due to shortage of staff. This led me to offer Resource Centre Organisation (RCO) as a third project option, as a means of staffing the Resource Centre and also offering practice to students in managing a centre. While this enabled the centre to be open for many more hours, staffed by SALL course students, and there is no doubt students enjoyed this option, RCO might also have seemed to them like a much easier option than mentoring, causing a lot of students to select this option as their project.

Outcomes

Once up and running each year, the project required very little maintenance and adjustment from myself. Having a mentor, for some of the mentees, equated to having a ‘fairy god-mother/ father’, who could help, through their guidance, to make their learning wishes come true. Comments from mentees’ responses to the questionnaire, previously mentioned, are testament to how they benefitted:

Mentee 1:

“It helped a lot that the age of the mentor was close to mine and the pleasant conversations we had gave me more confidence in terms of finding always an alternative when you are facing a problem because nothing is unsolved (*sic*).”

Mentee 2:

“Although it wasn’t perfect, the work we did was very helpful and I found the materials both provided by the mentor and the resource centre quite helpful to improve my weaknesses step by step.”

Mentee 3:

“I think it is a wonderful idea, because one can always learn things from a person who has already gone through the same things.”

As stated previously, the benefits for mentees and mentors were mutual. The following comments from mentors, testify to their job-satisfaction:

Mentor A:

“Working in my hometown didn’t allow me to meet my mentee as often as we may have wished at times. However, we were both cooperative and managed to find a way to meet each other quite regularly in a mentoring process.”

Mentor B:

“The importance of the project work i.e. mentoring, in this course was great. I had the opportunity to practise the theory about self-access systems I learned in the classroom. I learned how a self-access centre works, how to use the materials and the technology available there, and also how to cooperate peacefully with others such as my mentee or the staff of the SAC.”

Mentor C:

“On the whole it was an interesting programme that made me discover the resource centre and its facilities, as before I was completely unaware of its abilities (*sic*). I can certainly say that I enjoyed mentoring.”

The relationships worked well because the mentees’ needs brought to the surface, depths of knowledge and experience which would otherwise have remained untapped among mentors. Comments made in the questionnaires reiterated how much the self-confidence and self-esteem of both mentors and mentees increased, since being privy to such a personal and special learning relationship engendered pedagogic dialogue which was conducive to engendering positive affect and the development of cognitive and metacognitive thinking and discussion.

There is no doubt that the mentoring programme involved a good deal of risk-taking for the stakeholders involved. All of the learners were products of an education system which is hinged on test-taking, achieving high marks and fostering the kind of competition which verges on hostility. Mentoring, on the other hand, fosters trust and cooperation and confidence is boosted for all participants, engendering positive feelings. In one particular case, one of the mentors had previously been a mentee and was therefore able to experience the mentoring programme from both sides. Her comments were among the most encouraging for me as the instructor and made all the extra effort involved in the venture worthwhile: “Keep going, have strength and people will respond”.

Older students have the opportunity to think about and reflect on their own previous learning and feel useful to their younger peers when their knowledge and experience as learners proves so valuable. It also helps them to recognise their own weaknesses and strengths and gives them a second chance to put things right. SALL mentors reach an understanding of the principles behind autonomy and self-access learning through practical experience, offering greater reinforcement than lectures or reading SALL reference material. They could see Vygotsky’s principles of scaffolding, which we had discussed in class, unfold before their eyes and could lend a guiding hand so that their younger peers could reach their next Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, cited in Williams & Burden, 1997).

Mentees often developed strong friendships with their mentors. They could confess their difficulties and problems to their mentors and confide in them in a way they never could with their instructor. A slightly older peer mentor could coax, cajole, encourage them as and

when appropriate and could guide them on a path which they never thought possible. Indeed, many mentees confessed that they would like to have mentors to help them with other subjects in the syllabus. Fortunately, complaints were close to non-existent, and mainly referred to the limitations of the facilities rather than the programme itself.

It is, of course, important to have mechanisms in place, which allow for cross-checking of the information provided by mentors about the mentoring process, especially when work is graded. Particularly in the case of groups of mentors, it is important to be able to ascertain that one particular mentor has not been riding on the back(s) of others. There is also the danger that mentees may not always have been completely happy with the mentoring process and may have been coerced or ‘bullied’ into providing false statements. The records that participants were required to keep (see appendices) were designed to minimise such issues.

Conclusion

Although my situation in teaching these two quite different courses was perhaps unique, I feel sure that the principles involved do lend themselves to emulation. Despite the dangers of the inexperience and naivety in peer-mentoring processes, which some might regard as “the ignorant lead the unknowing” (Sampson & Cohen, 2001, p. 25), I feel that the opportunities that such processes offer should not be side-stepped or avoided, since occasions for one peer “enabling the other to make appropriate change(s)” (Gardiner, 2008, p. 8) will be lost. The skills required for mentoring to succeed, identified by Alfred, Garvey and Smith (2006) as listening, challenging, questioning and supporting, are within the range of abilities which older peers can offer their younger peers, creating a “developmental alliance” (Hay, 1995, cited in Carnell, MacDonald & Askew, 2006, p. 3) and “the ability to act”, which results from “constructive processes within relationships” (Miller, 1986, p. 2). For me, the importance of the mentoring programme was that it seemed to engender greater “access to self” through giving “access to suitably-qualified others” (Everhard, 2013, p. 229).

The argument here is not one for replacing paid professionals with what some might regard as poor or naïve amateurs, but it is an argument, based on preliminary evidence, that there is a degree of expertise and acquired knowledge within our student populations, which, if ignored, will remain forever hidden from view and untapped. A programme, such as the one described, where pedagogic misfortune and learning difficulties can be transformed into real learning opportunities for all, in self-access mode, seems like an opportunity too good to miss.

Notes on the contributor

Carol J. Everhard is an independent researcher and a former teaching fellow in the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, School of English (SOE), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. She taught and coordinated undergraduate courses on Language Mastery and Self-access and Foreign Language Learning and organized Self-access Language Learning (SALL) resources, first for British Council, Greece and then for SOE. Her research interests include learner autonomy, self-access, peer dynamics, learner-centred assessment and idiomaticity.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Simplified Version of Profile Card

MENTOR PROFILE

Pet name: _____

Surname: _____
First name: _____
Father's name: _____
Student number: _____
Place / country of origin: _____
Mobile Phone Number: _____
AUTH e-mail Address: _____
General Mentor: **Specific Mentor:** **Topic (s):** [_____]
[_____]
[_____]

Mentor / learner contract: **Yes** [] **No** []
Mentoring Group (1): **Yes** [] **No** []
Topic:

Mentor Members: **Mentee Members:**
.....
.....
.....

Mentoring Group (2): **Yes** [] **No** []
Topic:

Mentor Members: **Mentee Members:**
.....
.....
.....

1st Mentee/mentor Contact
Means of Contact :
.....
Outcome / Decision:

Comments:
.....
.....
.....

2nd Mentee/mentor Contact
Means of Contact :
.....
Outcome / Decision:

Comments:
.....
.....
.....

3rd Mentee/mentor Contact
Means of Contact :
.....
Outcome / Decision:

Comments:
.....
.....
.....

Appendix B

Learner Contract Between Mentor and Mentee

MENTOR / MENTEE SUPPORT CONTRACT

Mentor's name :

Mentee('s) (s') name (s):

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Group aims:

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Meetings arranged for:

Work Planned

Work Achieved

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Future Plans:

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Signatures:

Date:

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Appendix C

Mentor's Weekly Support

Date:

Mentor's name:

Mentee's name:

Other mentors:

Other mentees:

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Any changes this week:

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Activities carried out in the Resource centre:

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Activities carried out elsewhere:

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Mentor's comments:-

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Mentee's comments:-

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