

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

What peer mentoring taught us about undergraduate and postgraduate partnerships

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In August 2017, two students and I (Jennifer) commandeered an empty conference room to draft the outline for what would become Grand Canyon University's (GCU) peer mentoring initiative. We envisioned peer mentoring as a curricular endeavor, where peer mentors (PMs) would attend first-year writing classes alongside enrolled students to model student behavior, facilitate discussions, and offer feedback. Because GCU already had instructional assistants (IAs) who are similar to graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) at other universities, clear distinctions were drawn between IA and PM job responsibilities to assuage administrative concerns about potential Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) violations. Grading and classroom management, for example, were IA responsibilities; PMs were explicitly restricted from these activities. With PM duties codified, we secured administrative approval. That same semester, PMs entered the classroom.

Things looked rosy from a partnership perspective. Students and faculty collaborated from the outset and grew from pedagogical partners to research partners: one of the originating PMs co-authored an article about peer mentoring (Santos & Sims, 2020). Enrolled students were usually delighted to work with PMs and forged closer relationships with me in part because of the PMs.

However, I had neglected an important aspect of partnership: the IAs. At no point were IAs present in planning and development, so PMs and IAs found themselves in classrooms together with no purposeful integration. Perhaps predictably, one IA seemed to feel threatened by the PM. Seeking to protect the PM, I worked privately with the IA that semester. In subsequent semesters, I introduced new IAs to the concept of PMs during preliminary meetings.

After this one incident, things seemed to smooth out. The peer mentoring initiative continued to grow: more students transitioned to PM partnerships, more PMs engaged in research partnerships (e.g. Santos et al., 2021), and IAs seemed open to PM presence in class. In fact, IAs and PMs worked together to draft several articles during the summer of 2021, and it

was during our research that PMs (Bronson, Mari, AnJoli, Ryan, and Samantha) and IAs (Esther, Kendra, and Taylor) learned about the initial tension between the two roles.

Nestled in a handbook on peer mentoring, the group discovered a PM's description of his work with a GTA as "somewhat hostile" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 70). The group's initial response was a mixture of shock and humor. "That would never happen here," someone said. That's when I shared with the group: it did happen here. The silence that followed my confession was telling. Then, haltingly, a conversation ensued that represented two desires: one to understand how such a thing could happen and one to prevent future occurrences.

This essay, developed conceptually during that conversation, draws from and reflects on our partnership experiences with PMs and IAs. We hope to contribute to the gap in work on partnerships between undergraduate and postgraduate students (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) like IAs by reflecting on three questions: (a) what are PM experiences with IAs and IA experiences with PMs, (b) why do we believe that we work well as a team, and (c) why were we surprised that there had once been tensions between an IA and a PM?¹ We follow each section with analysis that, we hope, will help others contemplating undergraduate and post-graduate partnerships navigate this terrain.

PM EXPERIENCES WITH IAS AND IA EXPERIENCES WITH PMS

We preface this section by noting that all IAs and all PMs began their reflections with a statement indicating their nervousness about IA and PM work. For the sake of brevity, we provide excerpts that exclude these statements. The reader may well envision an opening sentence for each reflection expressing both excitement and anxiety.

What was your experience like working with an IA?

Bronson

I started peer mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic: I wasn't in person, and peer-mentored online for in-person classes. Since I wasn't in person, I didn't really get to know the IAs. When we got back to the classroom, it was a little intimidating because I had no real bonding time with these "teammates" of mine. I would almost compare it to being on a soccer team and not knowing who the star players are and only knowing the coach. But being me (an extrovert), I was there to make sure that the students were being served.

Mari

My first semester as a PM, I received a warm welcome from the IAs, the instructor, and the other PM. The IA was helpful with answering my questions. I was able to rely on her for support when I was unsure about the answers to give students in the class. For example, a student was struggling with the American Psychological Association publication style. Rather than giving a student the wrong answer, I reached out to the IA during class who helped me answer the student's question. The IA was eager to help, and I ended up learning a lot from her. At the end of the class, I was sad to hear that we would not work together the next semester. Having a relationship built on trust really helped.

AnJoli

During my first semester, Esther and Kendra made me feel comfortable when going to them for help learning how to guide students. Soon after, I met a new IA: Taylor. I was excited to meet her considering my previous experiences with IAs. When Taylor introduced herself, I

could tell we would get along. I remember I would always compliment her nails, and we would discuss our next nail sets. Our conversations flowed naturally. We realized we were interested in a lot of the same things. We both had similar experiences in high school, and we bonded over coffee. I felt like I could trust her. She made me feel very comfortable in the classroom. She would give me great tips on how to handle situations with students, and I would help her with questions she had about the course. Through our strong connection, we were able to create a collaborative classroom environment.

Samantha

Esther was the first IA that I worked with. It was easy to connect with her. She helped bring conversations to life as she was the complete opposite of me. I tend to be shy and quiet, especially in larger classrooms where I feel intimidated. Esther helped with that. I felt like I could talk to Esther, especially when it came to my education. I knew I wanted to go to graduate school, but the idea was quite scary. Esther gave me all sorts of advice about my options after I finish my undergraduate degree. Esther isn't the only IA who helped me. Another IA helped me when I wasn't sure how to help a student: Taylor began asking them questions that I had not thought about, and it really helped because then I also began to think of different ideas and the student, IA, and I were all able to come up with a solution.

Ryan

I relied on the IA to learn the ropes when I started peer mentoring. I learned techniques to assist the students, especially on the cause-effect paper. This was the paper I most struggled on when I took the course, so having the IA's input really helped me help the students. Still, being the youngest on the team (among junior PMs, senior PMs, and IAs) has caused some feelings of inferiority simply because I am not as experienced. This is not something anyone has caused me to feel; I am a naturally anxious person. The rest of the instructional team actually helps me with these feelings because I can turn to them when I am unsure.

What was your experience like working with a PM?

Esther

My work with PMs has always been positive. In fact, they helped me when the instructor was out sick, and I had to teach the class. I found myself struggling to advise students on a major assignment. Having never worked in this class with this instructor, I wasn't certain about how she would approach it. I turned to Samantha, one of the PMs, who shared her experiences and those of students she mentored previously. Due to our collaboration, I was able to see how to best guide the students.

Kendra

My experience working with PMs started with a student-IA relationship. I remember helping AnJoli with coursework and grading her assignments when she was in the class. Later, I learned that she was going to be a PM. I was glad to have her support while helping the students. Our time working together has gone smoothly because I already knew her. With other PMs, it took time to get to know them, which sometimes happened while working with students. The first time I worked in a class about academic argument, I wasn't entirely clear on the first assignment. A PM was able to use her experience with taking this class to clarify the confusion we were having.

Taylor

The PM I met in my first class, AnJoli, was friendly and talkative. I liked her right away. One day, before class started, we were chatting about a TV show AnJoli had been bingeing on Netflix; we were delighted to find out that we shared an interest in fandom and cheesy teenage television dramas. Taking the time to chat with the PM before class ended up providing both of us with the opportunity to forge a real relationship, one that was evident to the students and the instructor alike. We were able to help the students in a more meaningful way because we were able to model community in the classroom. Seeing us reach out to each other for help on tricky questions demonstrated teamwork for the students and made us seem approachable. We were able to call on each other's experiences to decide who would be best suited to address a given question. Overall, our relationship proved vital to the establishment of a productive and fun learning environment.

Analysis

When we read our reflections without the initial statements about nervousness, we observe that there seem to be few challenges facing members of our team. The two exceptions can be seen in Bronson's and Ryan's reflections. Ryan indicated a feeling of uncertainty that can arise for students in new partnerships (Healey et al., 2014) while Bronson demonstrated the results of attempted partnerships when members are silo-ed from each other. His description of playing on a team while knowing only the coach (but not the other players) highlights, inversely, the importance of forging relationships in true partnerships.

Contrast Bronson's description with the account of his fellow PMs and IAs: some reflections, like those by AnJoli, Taylor, Samantha, and Esther, might be paired side-by-side, with the reflections by the first two showing genuine delight in working together to help students and those by the latter demonstrating deep appreciation for the benefits that the other brings to the classroom. Still others, like Kendra's, show the ease with which it is possible for students to partner with IAs. The key, it seems, is a combination of factors: communication, willingness to forge relationships, a common goal of helping students, encouraging each other in and out of the classroom, and recognizing the benefits that others provide for students. These are the common threads of these narratives. We suggest that what we achieved organically is rooted in the notion that all partners view each other as part of a team.

WHY DO YOU THINK WE ALL GET ALONG SO WELL?

Bronson

We all have a common goal in mind for the students. On top of that, our environment was upbeat.

Mari

We are there with a common purpose. Everyone seems to be eager to help students and create an environment of inclusion and development. It is always about the students.

AnJoli

We all are on similar journeys and share the same passion for helping students. We all bring different perspectives of this experience to the classroom, and we respect what we all bring to the table.

Ryan

We all share a passion for helping students succeed. While we don't all share similar interests, we are all open-minded and recognize that each member of the team has strengths and weaknesses that they bring to the table; differences don't matter because we are focused on providing support to every student.

Samantha

We focus on helping both the students and each other; we all have something we bring to the team, whether introvert or extrovert. Even though we come from different backgrounds, we want to help others succeed. We are all part of a team.

Esther

We all care about the students' success. We all share the common goals of learning and teaching students to learn.

Kendra

We all have trust and respect for one another. While we do differ in experiences and interests, I think that is what helps us get along even more because the more we differ, the more we have to offer.

Taylor

We respect each other as resources to help the students in the best possible way. We all learn from each other's unique experiences and recognize the value that each of us brings to the classroom.

Analysis

Dwyer (2018) asserts that a "genuine partnership space" is predicated on communication and "shared goals and commitment" (p. 13). Our reflections, following a common theme, highlight the idea that each member of the instructional team comes from a different background but all share a common goal of facilitating positive learning experiences for students. This shared goal ultimately allows for the cultivation of the partnership space within the classroom. This is further evidenced in AnJoli, Kendra, Ryan, and Taylor's reflections, which address the value of differences. As Kendra noted, "the more we differ, the more we have to offer." Recognizing and valuing difference seems to be an underlying thread of our partnership experience, and it is this recognition that enables the exchange of ideas, a crucial aspect of reciprocity in partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). It is clear that common goals and mutual respect are key components of partnership between PMs and IAs in an instructional team.

WHY WERE YOU SURPRISED TO FIND OUT THAT AN IA FELT THREATENED BY A PM?**Bronson**

When I first heard about it, I didn't really think IAs would feel threatened by PMs, but PMs sometimes have more of a relationship with the students.

Mari

The culture of peer mentoring that I have been a part of is one of growth and acceptance. I have never felt anything negative toward an IA; I've always found it to be a healthy, positive experience.

AnJoli

I could not understand why they would feel that way. In my mind, I could never see any of the PMs doing anything to make any of the IAs feel uncomfortable.

Ryan

I cannot imagine that happening. Personally, I've never had a bad experience peer-mentoring. This is due to working with a team that is made up of open-minded, kind people.

Samantha

I did not know what to say. Even though we are all very different, we help to balance each other out.

Esther

I could not comprehend what would cause such a response.

Kendra

Meeting and working with all of the wonderful PMs made it confusing to hear. There are clear benefits of having both IAs and PMs on the instructional team.

Taylor

It was shocking because I can't imagine someone doing a job where the goal is to help students learn and feeling threatened by the very situation that would accomplish that task.

Analysis

In the longer versions of responses, most co-authors mentioned the role they perceived the instructor (Jennifer) playing in establishing a non-threatening, collaborative space between IAs and PMs. This perhaps indicates the importance of the instructor's awareness and attention to partnership in the classroom. Several reflections demonstrate a jump to defend the group as a truly functional team, as seen when Kendra and Ryan identify "team" as the best way to describe the collaborations between IAs and PMs. The co-authors' responses reveal that the trust necessary to avoid "contrived collaboration" (Tschannen-Moran, 2001, p. 308) and to move toward genuine partnership seemed to develop organically amongst the group.

Indeed, when asked to reflect on challenges and tensions between members of the team, not a single person had an example of IA-PM tensions (and additional discussion motivated a suggestion to "make some up"). The closest the responses get to demonstrating a tension is Bronson's theory about a potential closer relationship between PMs and students. Aside from this, all pointed to what is apparent in Mari's and AnJoli's reflections: the belief that our peer mentoring has a culture that feels comfortable, positive, and healthy. Perhaps this is, in part, due to what Samantha articulates when she points to the balancing of differences as part of what makes our team successful. We suggest that it is also very much due to the theme seen throughout reflections in all sections, summed up by Taylor: at the end of the day, it all comes back to helping the students.

CONCLUSION

Our reflections and their associated analyses derive from PMs and IAs working together in first-year writing courses; however, we believe the lessons that we have learned can apply to other disciplines where undergraduate and postgraduate students have the opportunity to partner. We suggest that others who may be embarking on similar endeavors can prevent problems by implementing strategies to create spaces to begin the work of building

community. These can be small things like coming to class a few minutes early to chat with other members of the instructional team or arranging pre-class introductions. We also recommend encouraging all parties to actively recognize the strengths of others in the partnership. Finally, it is important to cultivate a learning mindset. Indeed, if partners stay focused on learning, it will be easier to foster the trust and respect that serve as the foundation for true partnerships. We have been fortunate to have few issues thus far, but the intentional application of these principles could have prevented the very instance that occasioned this essay.

NOTE

1. All reflections have been edited for brevity with the unanimous consent of all co-authors.

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