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Disrupting the 'sage on the stage'

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Presentation abstract

This presentation explored the creation and sharing of resources with students via social media as a way of challenging the authoritative nature of traditional academic skills content (Gordon and Melrose, 2011; Price et al., 2017). The concept of the 'sage on the stage' has been replaced in recent years with a more active, student-centred learning environment (Roberts, 2016). However, this disruption to traditional methods of teaching requires more from the students (Morrison, 2014). Audiograms are bitesize audio-visual explorations of student questions about academic skills, created and distributed collaboratively with our Student Peer Mentors. The project amplifies student voices through multi-channel media assets, connecting with students where they are, digitally and physically. It had been anticipated that the peer mentors would take the lead in the audiogram creation, drawing on a range of student voices and researching, writing, and recording responses to them in the format of an advice columnist, so that the advice was given student to student.

The presentation discussed interview findings relating to the impact on the student peer mentors, their sense of ownership of the assets and their own learning. Firstly, the peer mentors struggled to find people to interview to generate questions, so had to use their own ideas. Secondly, they needed a great deal of structured support and input to create the answers. While the student peer mentors had a sense of teamwork around the audiograms' creation, they felt varying degrees of ownership. Ultimately, the audiogram creation was led, co-ordinated, and produced by a staff member. However, desired student outcomes were addressed through collaboration, problem-solving, and reflective production (Fernandez, Simo and Sallan, 2009; Al Qasim and Al Fadda, 2013; Forbes, 2015). The peer mentors also acted as coaches who could assist new students with time management, study skills, and goal setting (Parsloe and Wray, 2004). Student Peer

Mentors needed active support and supervision to achieve this. However, the results of the work bring a less formal and more engaging approach to the subject matter.

Community response

This presentation is valuable in its recognition that even if not everything runs according to initial intentions, there are still opportunities to learn and be inspired, and this was certainly true of this contribution. While we might aspire to leave behind the image of the 'sage on the stage', embracing instead the more active and participatory implications of the 'guide on the side', it is clear that although the teacher's role changes, there is perhaps less attention paid to how the student's role changes in response (Morrison, 2014). One possible solution is to take on the mantle of 'meddler in the middle' instead: a co-producer involved in the creation and reconfiguring of knowledge (McWilliam, 2009) who can offer students structured support as they navigate the complexities and demands of student-centred learning and teaching practices.

The main outcome of the session was inspiration: Anne-Marie's passion for this project came through so clearly. I was inspired to think about how we could engage our Student Advisors more in terms of the information they produce, and to have a go myself at creating short videos of students giving advice on specific aspects of study skills. I am really keen on the idea of producing a series of voice notes based on what students want or need to hear, and to have that created by other students, although having peer mentors run and develop the content would lend much greater authenticity.

The project could be taken even further. Creating a year-long, paid role for students of a couple of hours a week would allow much more development to take place - not just of the content, but of the students themselves. The learning developer's role would become a supervisory one, setting clear targets for the outputs to be produced and providing that structured support without giving the students too much responsibility too soon. The skills students would gain in time management, project management, and group work would be huge.

Next steps and additional questions

As always, the impact of what we do is something we need to measure somehow. I would be interested to hear if the videos were more widely viewed once they were available on the university YouTube site and how this viewing was tracked. Impact can be qualitative, too: if this project was repeated with other student mentors, the way in which they produced authentic questions and what those questions were would also be useful to capture.

It's worth thinking about other more material ways of engaging students too. Were the peer mentors paid for their time? How were they recruited, and was this a post that drew a lot of interest?

Author's reflection

Writing, researching, and presenting the lightning talk gave me the opportunity to reflect on the project. This project did not quite go as planned and was frustrating in many ways, although there were many positive aspects to it despite that. Listening to the preceding lightning talk 'Finding the balance' (Stowar, 2022) helped me to find peace with my sense of annoyance and frustration. The project created some fun and interesting resources and was a team effort. Reflecting on my role in the project, I felt I was more hands-on than I would have liked and that I had not disrupted the 'sage on the stage' role as much as I had hoped to. However, my role in the project was more like the meddler in the middle (McWilliam, 2009), as I worked with students as an active participant and co-creator albeit with an asymmetrical power dynamic.

The participants' comments gave me the opportunity to think about how the audiograms were structured, in terms of student input. The intention had been to engage the broader student population but instead the project mainly engaged the peer mentors. The research documented the impact on their learning but not the learning of the student population more widely, and this is something that could be followed up in future.

I had been thinking about the need to follow and track usage for the next phase of the project and the participants' questions about tracking current usage caused me to consider this. The videos were hosted on the university's presentation creation platform Kaltura

which has limited capacity to measure online engagement. I am currently thinking about using the material to create multiple assets across different platforms, and as part of this they will be converted into YouTube videos. YouTube video analytics offer better tools for tracking and greater capacity for building online engagement.

The project was carried out within the student peer mentors' paid hours and originated around the interests of a student peer mentor. Unfortunately, that student had to withdraw unexpectedly from being a peer mentor, leaving it more open to other peer mentors to adopt. These were existing peer mentors; there was no targeted recruitment for the project and it may have run differently if, for example, journalism students had been targeted. Nevertheless, the project progressed with the work being divided between the team, with the unexpected benefit of uncovering some hidden talents.

Acknowledgments

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Author details

Anne-Marie Langford has been a Learning Development Tutor at the University of Northampton for a year. Prior to this she worked in heritage education creating in-person

and online learning experiences for audiences from Early Years to adults. These experiences included sessions, trails, exhibitions, resource packs, and videos. She worked in a wide range of heritage environments from historic houses to multidisciplinary museums teaching across a wide range of subjects from Art History to Zoology. She has a strong interest in co-production and participatory consultation in creating learning experiences.