Peer-to-peer Mentoring Works in the College Newsroom

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Abstract

The positive impacts of workplace mentoring have been observed in the professional world and extensively documented in the literature. However, very little research has addressed the use of mentoring in academic environments, and no published studies address use of peer-to-peer mentoring within college media. This small study shows mentoring is used in a variety of different student media workplace skill areas, and that students find it overwhelmingly successful. Many students prefer peer-to-peer mentoring to instruction from faculty or professional staff. Peer-to-peer mentoring has the potential to reduce the burdens felt by faculty and staff in a time of diminishing resources in higher education. Further research is strongly recommended, in an effort to learn more about how mentoring can support the education of students working in college media.

Use of peer-to-peer mentoring in the college student media workplace

These are difficult times for students, faculty, and staff in higher education. Colleges and universities are straining to hold on to resources and preserve curriculum integrity amid strong student enrollment demand and frequent budget cuts (Hersch & Merrow, 2005; Axtell, 2003). In the communication disciplines, faculty hiring slowed in 2007-2008, even as a record number of communication-related degrees were awarded (Becker, Vlad, Desnoes, & Olin, 2009). Rapid technological change continues to present new demands on the communication subject areas and those who work with students in college media.

Clearly, academic programs have to find ways to do more with less, especially in regard to guiding students in the use of new media technology. One possibility for easing some of the burden would be increased use of student peer-to-peer mentoring – particularly in college student newspapers, broadcast facilities, and student-run advertising and public relations agencies.

Peer-to-peer mentoring allows the opportunity for students, working together, to train each other to master technical skills within student-run media. Creating situations in which students can work together to learn technical skills could free faculty and professional staff to focus more of their time and attention on helping students gain philosophical and concept knowledge.

Mentoring is commonly used in other academic disciplines and in the business workplace, and there is an extensive body of literature including descriptive and experimental studies addressing its impact. Mentoring has been shown to speed the acquisition of knowledge, build interpersonal and organizational trust, and enhance workplace morale.

While anecdotal evidence reflects that use of peer-to-peer mentoring is widespread within college student media, there has been a great neglect of the subject within existing scholarly and academic literature. An extensive literature review found no published studies addressing the general use of mentoring within the communication disciplines, or the specific use of peer-to-peer mentoring within the college media workplace.

This study serves as an initial effort to document use of peer-to-peer mentoring and some of its impacts. The study gathered information directly from students about the different media workplaces where peer-to-peer mentoring was used, the skill sets involved, and the perception of mentoring's effectiveness. The study did not focus on the integration of mentoring with the curriculum, although academic units could certainly use the findings here as a starting point from which to consider a formal application of peer-to-peer mentoring to support workplace and/ or learning goals.

Literature review

In the workplace, people develop strong interpersonal relationships when they engage with each other to clearly communicate about workplace tasks (Wigington, 2008). Organizationally, institutions that want to experience productivity and success must first have "a foundation of effective communication practices" (Gillis, 2007, p. 28) that employees agree upon and share. Use of mentoring in the workplace can help initiate and develop these individual and organizational strengths.

By definition, mentoring is a situation in which a worker "helps a protégé or mentoree become more professionally competent" (Cotugna & Vickery, 1998, p. 1166). Mentoring can support general business or organizational understandings as well as specific job completion skills.

Mentoring can greatly reduce workplace role ambiguity (Gentry & Shanock, 2008; Viator, 2000) and provide valuable information about workplace expectations (McCormack, 2010; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). It allows dissemination of information that might otherwise not be shared among co-workers (Guiniven, 2008). Mentoring can lead to development of "personal influence" that has been found to increase worker job satisfaction (White, Vane, & Stafford, 2010, p. 79). Personal influence is a significant force in the workplace, because employees who are "in the know" are more likely to feel respected and less likely to "spread rumors" about the organization (White, Vane, & Stafford, 2010, p. 80, 69).

Mentoring can pair senior and subordinate workers so that the senior worker trains the less-experienced employee (Corney & du Plessis, 2010). Or, in reverse mentoring, a junior employee can provide training for a senior staff member (Pyle, 2005). Workers who are peers – meaning they are on the same level in the hierarchy – can also engage in mentoring. Peer-to-peer mentoring relationships tend to be less threatening because workers can get feedback on their job performance from others who do not have influence over career progress (Peroune, 2007). Kepcher argued that the most valuable benefit of any kind of mentorship is the partnership with a co-worker who will provide accountability and perspective on tasks to be completed. "This is a favor even the brightest of us can't do for ourselves," she said (2011, para. 4).

The use of mentoring in the collegiate environment has received limited attention from researchers. Past studies have often focused on mentoring as a component of teacher training (Lai, 2010; McCann & Johannessen, 2009; Leh, 2005), or mentorship in freshman "first year experience" courses (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Other research has addressed theoretical concepts that relate to motivational influences on mentorship (Jarvela, 2011) or ethical guidelines for establishment of mentorship programs (Rhodes, Liang, &Spen-

cer, 2009).

Deutsch and Spencer (2009) reviewed literature about youth mentoring and acknowledged there have been "multiple calls" for research on mentoring in higher education. They urged for scholars to document "the conditions under which mentoring is likely to be helpful, and not harmful" (2009, p. 65-66).

Peer-to-peer mentoring would seen to be an ideal strategy to use with workers from the millennial generation, the demographic category representing people who came of age around the year 2000. This generational group makes up a large proportion of today's college students and presents a unique set of challenges (Evans, Schmalz, Gainer, & Snider, 2010; Epstein & Howes, 2006). Sometimes, older employers and educators have unfairly characterized this generation as lazy, ignorant, or lacking in communication skills (Teicher, 2010). It could very well be that students of this generational group just need a different structure in which to learn new tasks. Peer-to-peer mentoring within the college media environment might offer such a structure.

The present study was undertaken in order that we might develop some initial conclusions that would be immediately valuable to faculty and professional staff members who teach students in the college media workplace. It is also hoped that the research will might begin the process of inquiry and discussion in this subject area that is timely and relevant in our field.

Research questions

Three research questions were posed to guide this inquiry. Because there has been no previous investigation of peer-to-peer mentoring among students in the college media workplace, the questions are modest in scope.

RQ1: To what extent are students who work in college student media engaged in peer-to-peer mentoring?

RQ2: How are peer-to-peer mentoring relationships structured within the college student media workplace, and how are results of mentoring relationships evaluated?

RQ3: To what extent do student workers perceive benefit from peer-to-peer mentoring in terms of acquisition of knowledge, job skills, and workplace norms?

Methodology

This research was designed to gather data about peer-to-peer mentoring from college students who would have directly experienced such mentoring or witnessed it used with others in the college-media workplace. The most efficient way to gather this data was to contact students via e-mail and present an online survey instrument.

Questions for the instrument were modeled after those used in other surveys of mentoring practices (Avery, Tonidandel, & Phillips, 2008; Viator, 2001; Cotugna & Vickery, 1998). The researcher's university human subjects committee approved the instrument and administration procedures.

To assemble a population for sample, the researcher accessed the College Media Advisors 'List of Media Operations' online directory (http://www.collegemedia.org/view/college_list). Each of the linked CMA member websites was viewed for the purpose of gathering e-mail addresses of students working in college media. E-mail addresses collected included the media entity's general e-mail box address, the e-mail address for the highest-ranking student staff member (e.g. Editor in Chief), and every other student staff member e-mail address that could be located in a staff directory or 'about us' page.

In total, 1,334 e-mail addresses were collected from 242 college student media websites. On April 7, 2011, a survey invitation was sent to each e-mail address. The e-mail contained a hy-

perlink to be used to access the approved survey instrument. On April 19, a similar follow-up reminder was sent. After each e-mailing, approximately 50 e-mails were returned as undeliverable. A total of 144 respondents accessed the online survey. The instrument contained initial filtering questions to exclude respondents who indicated that they were not presently working in a college media workplace. As a result of the initial filtering, 24 respondents were excluded, leaving a sample population of 120 respondents. This reflects a response rate of 9%.

Results

Most respondents identified as female (68%). More than two-thirds of respondents identified as undergraduate juniors or seniors (76%). Respondents were evenly divided in terms of their college-media workplace experience. Half of all respondents reported two or more years of experience in college student media work (50%), and an identical proportion of respondents reported less than two years of experience.

A majority of respondents described their workplace as a student newspaper or magazine (77%). Smaller numbers of respondents reported working in a campus radio station (14%), television station (4%), or other media-related entity (4%).

RQ1: To what extent are students who work in college student media engaged in peer-to-peer mentoring?

Respondents were presented with a definition of peer-to-peer mentoring. Among all respondents, about two-thirds were familiar with the concept (60%) but more than half reported no personal involvement in it (52%).

Then, respondents were asked if peer-to-peer mentoring was used in their workplace. Most respondents answered that they "did not know" (44%). A slightly smaller number answered in the affirmative (41%). Fourteen percent indicated that peer-to-peer mentoring was not used in their college media workplace.

Because most respondents indicated that peer-to-peer mentoring was either not used in their media workplace – or if it was, they had no knowledge of it – a much smaller number of respondents were allowed to proceed to additional questions contained in the instrument. In total, 48 respondents who indicated that peer-to-peer mentoring was used in their workplace were then asked how mentoring techniques were used.

The respondents were presented with ten skill sets commonly included in workplace mentoring programs. Respondents were asked to identify the skill sets targeted by peer-to-peer mentoring in their media workplace. Results are shown in Figure 1. Respondents were asked to characterize success in each area. In total, 46% of respondents rated the impact of mentoring in the ten areas as "successful or very successful."

RQ2: How are peer-to-peer mentoring relationships structured within the college student media workplace, and how are results of mentoring relationships evaluated?

Among respondents who indicated peer-to-peer mentoring was used in their media workplace, most noted that mentoring was applied in an "informal and unstructured" way (51%), as opposed to a "structured, organized system of training" (36 %), or a system in which faculty assess and / or match students needing guidance (12 %).

The majority of respondents (74 %) indicated that there was no measurement program to document the success of peer-to-peer mentoring, or if there was a measurement program they were not familiar with it. Twenty three percent indicated a quantitative or qualitative measurement program was in effect.

Respondents were asked who is responsible for assessing the results of peer-to-peer mentoring. Almost half (48%) indicated the responsibility lies with a senior member of the student

staff. A lesser number of respondents (36%) indicated there appears to be no assessment plan in place. Twenty one percent indicated identified a faculty or professional staff member as responsible. The remaining respondents (18%) said that individual workers are responsible for assessing their own success.

RQ3: To what extent do student workers perceive benefit from peer-to-peer mentoring in

Figure 1

Workplace skill sets addressed by peer-to-peer mentoring

(n = 33 respondents)

	Percentage of respondents who observed peer-to-peer mentoring in this skill set
Development of writing, editing, reporting and/ or interview skills.	84
General workplace expectations and policies.	66
Development of website design of management skills.	54
Training with computer software (e.g., word processing or spreadsheets).	48
Training with broadcast technology (e.g., cameras, microphones, lighting).	42
Working with clients or advertisers.	36
Training with computer hardware (e.g., computers printers, or file servers)	30
Training with broadcast editing.	27
Publication or distribution (e.g., newspaper printing or delivery)	21
Event planning	15

terms of acquisition of knowledge, job skills, and workplace norms?

Students overwhelmingly reported positive experiences as a result of peer-to-peer mentoring. In fact, there was strong indication that in some respects students may prefer it to traditional instructional methods. Among those who had participated in peer-to-peer mentoring,

48% indicated they would rather learn new skills from a peer as opposed to learning from a faculty or professional staff member. Forty-two percent claimed their student peer mentor was "more helpful than a faculty or professional staff member would have been."

Among respondents who had participated in peer-to-peer mentoring, 90% said they would recommend it to other students working in college media. Respondents recognized both personal and professional benefits from mentoring. Figure 2 identifies respondents' level of agree-

Figure 2

Respondents' agreement with statements about benefits of peer-to-peer mentoring

(n = 33 respondents)

	Agree or strongly agree
Peer-to-peer mentoring made me more productive in my job.	90
Peer-to-peer mentoring was a valuable use of my time.	87
Peer-to-peer mentoring allowed me to make new friends.	81
Peer-to-peer mentoring improved my understanding of the college media workplace.	81
Peer-to-peer mentoring allowed me to make new friends.	80
Peer-to-peer mentoring gave me important workplace knowledge I will need after graduation.	78
Peer-to-peer mentoring allowed me to learn things I might not have learned any other way.	75
In my organization, people who have used peer-to-peer mentoring are more productive.	72
My peer-to-peer mentoring experience met or exceeded my expectations for professional growth.	71
Peer-to-peer mentoring doesn't just work for people with lots of friends.	69
I feel less intimidated about new ideas because of my peer-to-peer mentoring experience.	60

Negative polarity questions from original instrument reversed here for ease of comparison and review.

ment to a series of statements focusing on specific benefits of the mentoring relationship.

At the end of the instrument, a set of open-ended questions allowed respondents to offer their opinion about successful use of peer-to-peer mentoring. More than half the respondents offered comments. The comments are insightful and echo the conclusions of scholars who have studied the impact of mentoring.

Several students noted the importance of being personally motivated to learn:

• "I think that it is important that the mentee wants to learn. There is definitely a certain type of motivated personalities at our student newspaper because they are the people who seek help when they need it."

• "People want to see you're inspired to work otherwise they are less likely to take the time to help you."

• "I highly recommend it; our student newspaper is entirely student-run, and I think there is a lot of pride inherent in figuring out how to do something with your peers instead of being told how to do it by a faculty member. It also allows for greater creativity since each new generation is learning different things and learning differently–there's a higher turnover of ideas."

Others noted the importance of interpersonal skills in a mentoring relationship:

• "Be willing to share your time with the peer you are mentoring; take a step back to see their perspective as they learn."

• "I believe there has to be some amount of give-and-take from both sides. The mentor must also be helpful and educated themselves on the skills they are trying to teach."

Several respondents' recommendations dealt with the strategic aspects of a mentoring relationship:

• "Offer multiple trainings and make them submit a reflection of their training experience, including how the training applies to the current job and possibly in their future outside of Student Media."

• "Have a structured peer-to-peer mentoring program in the future with requirements for the younger person to have to complete by the end of it. You need to provide a structure so that everybody gets something out of the program."

• "Follow-up is key; if you establish a relationship with a younger staff member and let it fall off after they become better acquainted to Student Media, they tend to start slipping in their learning experience."

Limitations

Despite the researcher's best efforts to secure respondent participation, the study is limited by its small sample size. It is unwise to make many broad, sweeping conclusions about the totality of the college media workplace, based on the small number of students who participated in this study. However, given that no published studies could be found that in any way address the use of peer-to-peer mentoring within the college media workplace, this research has merit as a 'first step' toward the development of such knowledge.

College Media Advisers is the preeminent professional organization for faculty and professional staff members involved with college media. The CMA's directory was the ideal place to identify students who would most likely have involvement with mentoring, and participate in a survey about it. Although a diligent effort was made to identify student workers, several methodological challenges immediately became evident. Some college media websites did not list any e-mail addresses. Others used a web-based form as the only contact mode. Others directed visitors to a blog. One could easily get the impression that some CMA member media

entities wish to avoid interaction with those who visit their websites.

It is difficult to determine a "best" time to extend a survey to college students. It was felt that a survey late in the academic year would be most reasonable, in that it would allow students who were new to the college media environment time to reflect on their mentoring experience during the year. A survey administration in April was chosen so that students could get the invitation late in the academic year, after spring break and before final exams. The percentage of survey invitations returned undeliverable (4%) did not seem excessive. However, the overall response rate was lower than the researcher has experienced previously with online surveys involving college students.

The researcher regrets that a software problem resulted in loss of some data. Respondents were asked to rate the success of peer-to-peer mentoring in each of the ten work task areas. A data collection error resulted in an inability determine how many respondents ranked "successful or very successful" in each of the individual task areas – although the average ranking of success in all areas was recorded as noted in RQ1 results.

Discussion

The results of this study show two-thirds of respondents are familiar with the concept of peer-to-peer mentoring, but only 41% of respondents knew for sure that peer-to-peer mentoring was used in their student media workplace.

Among those respondents who had peer-to-peer mentoring experience, most of that experience seems to have come in an informal and unstructured way, with no system for measuring its outcomes and specific benefits. This is contrary to experts' recommendations. Success of any mentoring program is dependent on a sound organizational structure with defined outcome expectations (Hall, & Jaugietis, 2011; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). Establishing a mentorship program without adequate preparation and support structures can result in discouragement or even resentment among participants (McCann & Johannessen, 2009). An unstructured mentoring program with no specific outcome expectations results in a situation in which no one is held accountable for mentoring's success or failure. In other words, in the college media environment, a poorly structured mentoring program could bring more harm than good.

Still, among survey respondents who have participated in peer-to-peer mentoring, 90% would recommend mentoring to their fellow students – and 48% said they preferred peer-to-peer mentoring to instruction from a faculty or professional staff member. This, together with the responses to the survey's open-ended questions, shows students perceive a variety of individual and organizational benefits when asked to learn new tasks alongside their peers.

Conclusion

Many college media programs struggle with the demands of new media education and convergence (Sarachan, 2011; Cahill, 2009; Barry, 2005). It is not surprising that communication faculty surveyed in 2006 reported increasing frustration over too many workplace demands and not enough time to deal with everything (Swanson, 2006).

College faculty and staff need to find more efficient instructional methods. It could be that peer-to-peer mentoring would provide an efficient means of training students. The results of this small study suggest peer-to-peer mentoring offers a method that students readily respond to.

Despite the stated limitations, it is hoped that the findings of this study might motivate educators to consider increased, more strategic use of peer-to-peer mentoring within the college
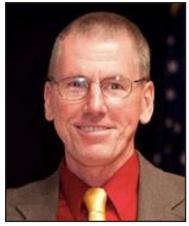
media workplace. Likewise, it is hoped this study might motivate scholars to conduct further research, build on these findings, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of all the ways peer-to-peer mentoring contributes to teaching and learning within the college student media workplace.

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