

Transition in, Transition out: A sustainable model to engage first year students in learning. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Peer mentoring, presented as an inclusive teaching approach, embedded in the curriculum, has been successfully implemented to support first year student learning. Developing sustainable and scalable models for large first year cohorts, however, provides a challenge. The Transition in, Transition out model is a sustainable peer mentoring model supporting the transition of both first and final year students. The model has been implemented in two Australian psychology programs, one face-to-face and one delivered online. The focus in this Practice Report will be on the outcome data for on-campus first year student at one university. Participants were 231 first year students (166 females and 65 males). Results suggest positive changes in academic performance and learning approaches as well as positive endorsement of the model.

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Background

Peer mentoring is a well-established approach to support first year transition, with a range of benefits. As Husband and Jacobs (2009) note, peer mentoring can orient students to learning at university, helping them “adapt to a new study environment, course related problems, and general study issues and concerns” (p. 230). Peer mentoring can also support the psychosocial transition of students, helping to ameliorate the relatively high levels of depression, anxiety and stress often noted amongst first year cohorts (Chester, Xenos, Ryan, Carmichael, & Saunders, 2009; Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley, & Audin, 2006). Additionally, peer mentoring can facilitate cohort experiences for students, encouraging meaningful connection across year levels (Martin, Collier, & Carlon, 2009). Finally, the low cost of implementing peer mentoring programs makes them an attractive option (Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2008). However, when the first year group is large, recruiting enough mentors can be a challenge. The Transition in, Transition Out (TiTo) model described in this Practice Report provides a scalable and sustainable solution.

The TiTo model

TiTo was designed as an inclusive teaching approach, embedded in the first and third year curriculum in the discipline of psychology to support both first year students as they transition into the program and third year students as they transition out. The TiTo model supported both academic and psychosocial adjustment to university. Following early feedback from students, emphasis was on engaging commencing students in the learning tasks in the first year curriculum,

in particular developing deep and strategic approaches and minimising surface learning. Psychosocial support played an implicit role in the model.

TiTo is different to existing supplemental instruction models such as those instituted widely in US colleges like Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS; Dawson, Lockyer, & Ferry, 2007) and Peer Assisted Learning (PAL; Longfellow, May, Burke, & Marks-Maran, 2008). While often associated with good success rates for those students who attend, supplemental models have been limited by infrequent and inconsistent participation (Hill & Reddy, 2006; Longfellow et al.). In response to the criticisms of opt in mentoring models, TiTo was embedded into the curriculum.

Early work to develop the model used a randomised control trial design to evaluate its efficacy. Positive outcomes included improvements in academic performance, self-efficacy and retention, as well as psychosocial aspects and wellbeing (Chester, Xenos, & Burton, 2012; Ryan et al., 2009). In the early iterations of the model, mentors were recruited from third year students with a Distinction average. Mentors were high performing student volunteers, who took on the additional mentoring commitment in the final year of their program. This approach had several limitations. First, recruiting from a select group of final year students did not provide the large number of mentors needed for scalable implementation across all first year tutorials. Second, mentoring provides the development of work-ready skills and this opportunity should not be restricted to only the highest performing students. Indeed it could be argued that the graduating students with weaker academic records should be targeted for additional skill development.

In the most recent revision of the TiTo model, third year students were trained to be mentors as part of a final year capstone course. These mentors undertook four hours of training prior to the commencement of the program and then attended one hour of first year tutorials each week, working with small groups of first year students for 8 of the 12-week semester. Two-hour briefing sessions for mentors, held weekly, provided ongoing support as these students prepared for their mentoring responsibilities as well as offered opportunities to debrief and share strategies. Mentoring focused on engaging first year students in learning, encouraging them to take an active and reflective approach, enhancing skills in both individual and group-based learning. Specific mentoring activities were designed to support assessment tasks, which included students' reflections on their own learning approaches and the development of a learning contract.

Evaluating TiTo

This Practice Report presents outcomes of the TiTo model for first year students in terms of learning approaches and academic performance. In addition, student evaluations of TiTo are summarised.

A key question was the extent to which later year mentors, some of whom had only just passed the course themselves, could provide a quality mentoring experience for first year students. A repeated-measures pre-test post-test design was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, with first year students completing self-report measures (described below) at the beginning and end of semester.

Learning approaches

Learning approaches were measured using the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST; Entwistle, 2000). The ASSIST measures three learning approaches: deep, strategic and surface. The scale includes 52 items, each of which is answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1=*disagree* to 5=*agree*). The deep approach comprises 4 sub-scales (seeking meaning, relating ideas, use of evidence and interest in ideas), the strategic approach comprises 5 sub-scales (organised studying, time management, alertness to assessment demands, achieving and monitoring effectiveness) and the surface approach comprises 4 sub-scales (lack of purpose, unrelated memorising, syllabus-boundness and fear of failure). The internal consistencies of the three learning approaches scales in the present study were all acceptable - deep ($\alpha = .85$), strategic ($\alpha = .86$) and surface ($\alpha = .79$).

Academic performance

Academic performance was measured by marks achieved in the first year course in which peer mentoring took place. Marks were recorded as a percentage and compared with grades achieved in a previous year when no mentoring was provided.

Peer mentoring evaluation

Three forced-choice questions were used to evaluate first year perceptions of the peer mentoring program: *peer mentoring helped the quality of my work*, *peer mentoring helped me feel like I belong*, and *I enjoyed peer mentoring*. Each question was answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*).

Table 1: Repeated measures t-test ASSIST scores for first year students

Learning approach	Pre-test		Post-test		t(230)	p	d
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)			
Deep	2.11	(.57)	3.99	(.58)	-27.23	<.001	-4.49
Strategic	2.23	(.61)	3.64	(.68)	-16.80	<.001	-2.02
Surface	3.15	(.61)	2.79	(.64)	4.81	<.001	.58

TiTo outcomes

Table 1 compares learning approach (ASSIST) scores. Compared to the beginning of semester, ASSIST scores at the end of semester were significantly higher on deep and strategic learning (with

Final marks in the first year course in which mentoring took place were compared with final marks from a previous cohort who completed comparable assessment and had similar teaching but no tutorial-based mentoring. While the proportions of students who both failed

Table 2: Evaluation of TiTo by first year students (N = 247)

	Percentage (n) of students				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Peer mentoring helped the quality of my work	19 (43)	40 (93)	20 (46)	13 (30)	8 (19)
Peer mentoring helped me feel like I belong	20 (47)	41 (94)	22 (53)	10 (22)	7 (15)
I enjoyed peer mentoring	30 (68)	40 (93)	16 (36)	9 (21)	6 (13)

moderate effect sizes) and significantly lower on surface learning (with a small effect size).

the course and achieved High Distinctions was comparable over time (approximately

12% and 5% respectively), the proportion of students with pass grades almost halved under TiTo, meaning a higher percentage of students achieved grades over 60%.

Table 2 summarises the percentage agreement with the three statements used to evaluate the TiTo program. The majority of first year students enjoyed the program (70%) and perceived it to positively influence their academic work (59%). Despite the explicit focus on academic

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this Practice Report suggests that TiTo can provide a scalable solution to the provision of mentoring for all first year students, even in large cohorts. Data summarised here suggest that TiTo is part of a package in this undergraduate curriculum that enhances deep and strategic learning and academic performance. With the exception of a small group of first year students, TiTo was generally positively perceived. It appears that good training and high quality, ongoing support for mentors can support even those who are not academically strong to make a useful contribution to the transition of first year students.

Outcomes of the discussion

The authors are grateful to the large number (more than 50) of delegates who participated in the group discussion and shared their insights with the project team. A summary of the key outcomes of our Nuts and Bolts session follows.

- What are the critical features required for the success of TiTo? Participants recognised the importance of “buy-in”

from course coordinators to champion the TiTo mentoring program and ensure its sustainability within the program of study.

- To what extent can these outcomes, described within the discipline of psychology, be generalised to other programs? Participants believed there were very few programs that do not need communication skills and felt that the TiTo program could be of value to other programs of study beyond the psychology discipline. A key value of the program is its focus on facilitating student transition and developing students' generic study skills.
- What would be required to embed TiTo in your program? Participants stated that it was vital that the TiTo program received strong support and endorsement from the university leadership team, including the Head of School and Dean, and where possible, also the Deputy Vice Chancellor and/or Pro Vice Chancellor. The importance of training was recognised and it was recommended that aspects of the TiTo model might be layered throughout the program to support the varying needs of students as they transition into and out of their program of study.
- Are there any specific aspects that might constrain the implementation of TiTo in your program/School/University? Most participants agreed that the TiTo program was positive because it is not based on the deficit model and it provides a valuable opportunity for students to develop their knowledge and practise their skills in a safe learning environment.

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