



Opening the flood gates? Using peer learning to facilitate an open access academic literacy “shopfront”

Key Words

peer learning; mentors; transition; first-year experience; non-traditional students; academic literacy

Abstract

In the provision of academic literacies and language support, reducing barriers to access can take many forms. Open access is frequently conflated with remote and online learning, yet this mode poses significant challenges for a diverse cohort studying at a regional university campus. In the authors' experience, undergraduate and enabling students from first-in-family and low-SES backgrounds respond positively to face-to-face, individualised support, with as few barriers as possible (O'Shea, 2016; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009; Townsend, Delves, Kidd, & Figg, 2011). To facilitate open access academic literacy support for this unique cohort, the authors—learning advisers based at a satellite campus of an Australian regional university—established an ALL “shopfront” in 2014, called Writing Drop In. The program operates as scheduled “drop in” style sessions which focus on writing and are facilitated by learning advisers and postgraduate student mentors. The sessions provide students with “just in time—just for me” support, as they are able to immediately access help with referencing, grammar, text-type structure, English language, academic writing conventions, and, occasionally, study skills advice (Copeman & Keightley, 2014; Meer & Scott, 2008). If students present to Writing Drop In with more specialised needs, then those students are referred onto the learning adviser during the session or booked in for a follow up individual consultation with a learning adviser. In addition to increasing enabling and undergraduate students' access to academic support, the program also provides on-campus higher degree research (HDR) students with employment and workplace training, as well as an opportunity to build supportive collegial relationships (Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, & Collins, 2015; Townsend et al., 2011). Writing Drop In removes barriers between ALL support and students (Copeman & Keightley, 2014; Dooley, McNiece, & Martin, 2012; Williamson & Goldsmith, 2014). Learning advisers play an important role in juggling the balance between the pre-emptive, targeted generic skills workshops and course specific lectures and workshops with the more responsive, “just in time—just for me” support offered in Writing Drop In, where the same resources (written by LA's) are available, thus maintaining consistency and continuity (Meer & Scott, 2008). This paper will outline the program's main features and successes, focusing on how its open access nature facilitates a triage function for ALL support, and establishes a continuum of support that stretches from enabling through to postgraduate students, which normalises help seeking behaviours and reduces stigma (Mallman & Lee, 2016). Given the success of the program to date, it is crucial to critically evaluate and reflect on some of the challenges encountered in the process of implementing and sustaining our face-to-face open access mode for ALL support, and how these considerations can assist ALL practitioners in formulating successful approaches to supporting students through peer learning and open access modes (Adam, Skalicky, & Brown, 2011; Williamson & Goldsmith, 2014; Zepke & Leach, 2006).

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