

Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium

Mind the Gap: Mentoring, Goal-setting and Self-Evaluation for International Graduate Students

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to understand how peer mentoring and exercises to encourage goal-setting and self-evaluation can support first year international graduate students to engage in Canadian universities' online learning environment during COVID-19. Surveys, students' work, and instructors' reflections were used to inform the current study. Preliminary findings show that during COVID-19, online peer mentoring and exercises to encourage goal-setting and self-evaluation have been able to support international students' behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement in Canadian academic learning to a certain degree. The findings also show that there is a need to use real-time communication tools to enhance the e-peer mentoring process for international students in an online course environment. Although the personal goal-setting exercises were new experiences for many of the international students, they proved to be valuable steps in their adaptation to Canadian graduate studies.

Keywords: international student engagement, online mentoring, goal-setting, self evaluation

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore how first year international graduate students are supported to adapt to, and engage in, Canadian universities' online learning environments during COVID-19. Canada ranks third globally as a destination for international students. The first term of a graduate studies' program in a Canadian university often requires major adjustments for all students enrolled. In the case of international students, challenges include facing a brand-new environment where academic, linguistic, and pedagogical norms may differ significantly from those they have experienced in the past. In the fall term of 2020, educators were conscious that the geographic, psychological, and emotional 'gaps' in taking up graduate studies in Canada would be, in many cases, even greater than usual. Courses would be delivered online and the vast majority of theose international students enrolled in Canadian universities were unable, due to COVID-19 international travel restrictions, to obtain visas allowing them to at the least immerse themselves in the culture of the city that was home to their chosen university. Given the context, it was important for those instructors designing and delivering courses to put in place structures to facilitate the successful integration of international students into the Canadian higher-educational settings. Informed by student engagement theories (Kahu, 2013), this exploratory study attempts to understand how peer mentoring and exercises to encourage goal-setting and self-evaluation can support first year international graduate students to engage in Canadian universities' online learning environment during COVID-19.

Literture Review

The following definition of student engagement is adopted in our study:

Student engagement is the energy and effort that students employ within their learning community, observable via any number of behavioural, cognitive or affective indicators across a continuum. It is shaped by a range of structural and internal influences, including the complex interplay of relationships, learning activities and the learning environment. The more students are engaged and empowered within their learning community, the more likely they are to channel that energy back into their learning, leading to a range of short and long term outcomes, that can likewise further fuel engagement ([Bond et al., 2020](#)).

Studies have demonstrated the positive role of mentoring and peer mentoring programs in supporting international students' adjustment and engagement in Canadian higher-educational settings (Thomson & Esses, 2016). However, there is not much study examining the role of computer-mediated mentoring, especially e-peer mentoring, in international students' academic journey in Canadian universities. In our study, we combine e-peer mentoring and goal-setting/self evaluation exercises to support international students' engagement and integration into Canadian higher education. To shape the mentoring project, we borrowed ideas from an original website mounted by the University of Reading in the United Kingdom. From this website, we adopted Eric Parsloe's idea of mentoring: "Mentoring is to support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximize their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be" (University of Reading, n.d.). We adopted this definition of mentoring because it highlights a spirit of growth,

suggests that the responsibility of learning lies within the mentees, and that the mentoring process is non-directive and is not there to solve problem for mentees. The mentees also have to establish their own goals and get help as needed from mentors. Together with goal setting and self-evaluation exercises, we hoped that the mentoring project could help international students become more engaged while taking more responsibility for their learning in online environments.

Methods

This study involves 20 international graduate students taking a mandatory online comparative and international educational course at the University of Windsor. Two thirds of the international students were taking the online course from their home country, namely India and China. At the beginning of the course, the instructional team sought the leadership of international graduate students in their second year of the program to serve as mentors to the new students. Pairings were established between second-year student mentors with first-year student mentees. Once pairings were created, student mentors and mentees were provided with a relatively simple description of the purposes of mentoring and the role of mentors inspired by the model in place at the University of Reading. Throughout the semesters, the instructor team checked-in with individual mentors on a biweekly basis to see if they needed any support. Near the end of the semester, a simple online survey was conducted with both mentors and mentees to figure out modifications that would be needed to build on the initial mentoring experience. Two different surveys were designed and distributed to mentors and mentees respectively. In an effort to lead the international students to make early adjustments to Canadian teaching and learning practices, the international students were also introduced to a model of personal goal-setting for the course. They were also required to formally evaluate, in a short essay, their progress on their five chosen goals over the fall term. To inform this study, we gathered, analyzed, and reflected on the students' self-evaluation short essays as well as the surveys carried out with mentors and mentees.

Results

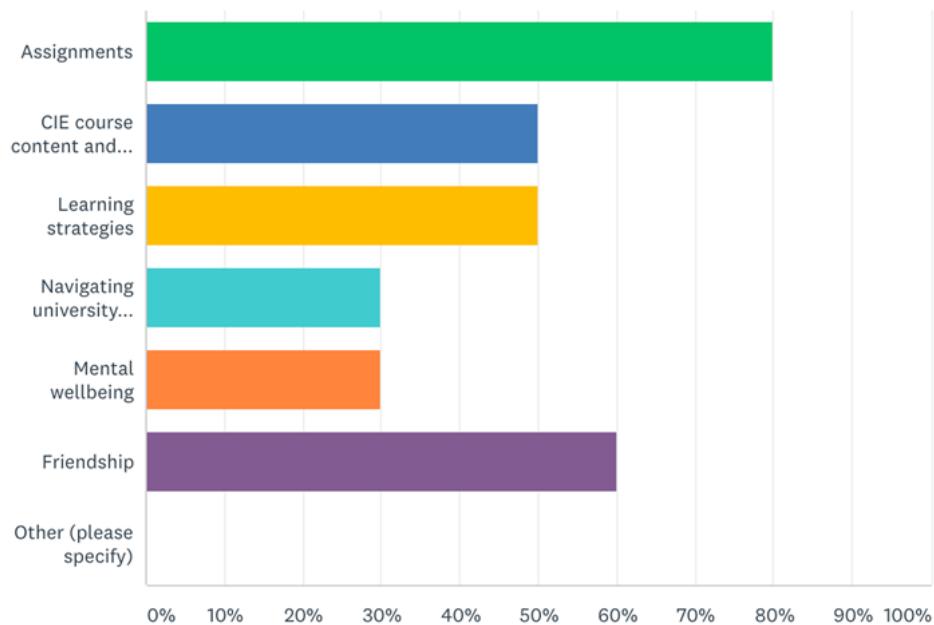
E-Peer Mentoring

Based on results from our survey with student mentees, we learned that more than a half of our student mentees were able to establish connection with their mentors through the e-peer mentoring project. Student mentees were mostly looking for academic support and advice from their mentors. This involved finding help on APA citation, essay writing, and how to get good grades in a Canadian university. The results from surveying student mentees corroborated with the results found in our survey conducted with student mentors. For instance, 8 out of 10 mentors said that they provided mentoring support in the area of writing assignments to their mentees (Figure 1). This suggests that the e-peer mentoring project has been able to support and engage international students' academic learning to a certain degree.

Figure 1
One of the results from surveying student mentors

What kinds of support did you provide to your mentee(s)?

Answered: 10 Skipped: 0



Additionally, a majority of mentors and mentees participating in the e-peer mentoring project wished that they could have had better instant communication tools and more face-to-face sessions (open camera) with each other organized by the instructional team before and during the online course. This implies that mentors and mentees would like to feel more connected with each other in online-learning settings, and that professors could play important roles in providing conditions that deepen connections between mentors and mentees in an online-learning environment.

Goal Setting and Self-Evaluation

For many of the international students, the goal-setting exercise was both new and somewhat challenging. The professor had to emphasize the importance of this assignment as a valuable exercise. The goals set by the students related, as expected, to skill and competency development more often than content knowledge and understanding of concepts in the study of comparative and international education. The skills most frequently pinpointed involved aims to improve the quality of written assignments, approaches to reading for understanding, oral communications, academic-skill development, and critical thinking.

The students were required to submit, at the end of the term, a two-page paper listing, discussing, and evaluating their progress and performance regarding their five goals for the course. They were to assign a score out of ten points. Despite the fact that this was a new experience, the papers were sound and well-written.

One student wrote:

As a conclusion, I give myself eight as my self-evaluation mark. I think it's a good way to evaluate oneself at the end of the course. I look back at what I learned during the semester and find out my progress in many aspects. I have expanded my horizon of knowledge, gained more confidence in presentation, and have more thoughts about education.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the preliminary findings from our study show that during COVID-19, online peer mentoring and exercises to encourage goal-setting and self-evaluation have been able to support international students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement in Canadian academic learning to a certain degree. Our study further shows that there is a need to use real-time communication tools to enhance the e-peer mentoring process for international students in an online environment. Although the personal goal setting exercises were new experiences for many of the international students, they proved to be valuable steps in their adaptation to graduate studies, including development of learner autonomy and self-directed learning in the Canadian context. There were many benefits for the students and for the professor, derived from the goal setting and self-evaluation exercise. These included an emphasis on the importance of establishing personal goals for a course and providing a structure for establishing the goals and the ensuing self-evaluation. The exercise promoted consciously tracking one's progress and reflecting on one's learning. Students gained practical experience with an approach that they could later employ in their own professional practice. The instructor gained insight into the thinking, the challenges, and the motivation and the progress of the students. Further studies could be conducted to understand, in greater details, how online peer mentoring and individual goal setting and self-evaluation could strengthen international student engagement in Canadian higher educational settings using tools and computer-mediated technologies.

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