Review Article

Engaging technology and supporting student mental health through connected online peer mentoring

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This case study explores the impact of an online peer mentoring programme on student mental health within a widening participation UK higher education institution [HEI]. During the past two years, there has been a drastic transition from face-to-face learning to on-line modes of delivery. Fuelled by the pandemic crisis, the move to online learning has encouraged an innovative and greater use of technologies to connect learners with learning, and content with circumstance. Many students experienced heightened levels of distress and a disconnect from their learning environment. This disconnect and period of isolation often negatively impacted student mental health and created additional problems for those who had to balance learning with adverse life experiences. Whilst the pandemic succeeded to divide, it equally brought opportunities in the form of innovation and engagement through peer mentoring. The peer mentoring programme SMILES (Sports Mentoring Inclusive Learning Experience Scheme) is a widening participation scholarship of teaching and learning project at the University of East London. SMILES has continued to develop and support student success through integrated transition, outreach and more recently on-line networking. The most significant impact statistic was the reach of the SMILES program during the pandemic. Using technologies such as MS TEAMS, Padlets, podcasts (Spotify) and social media (Instagram and Twitter), SMILES was able to provide group support for students not only within the institution but internationally. Through the SMILES project and innovative use of technology, a new mentoring application (app) was developed to support students. The app enables students to view mentor demographics and request specific mentors who align with mentee expectations. During the period June 2019 to December 2021, SMILES increased its reach by 300%. This chapter locates peer mentoring in context by analysing key components of using technology to support mental health on-line. Recommendations for future practice are provided.

Keywords: Peer mentoring, Online, Mental health, Communities of practice, Connection

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1. Introduction

The pandemic crisis has fuelled a move to online learning. A space distinctly different from the on-campus classroom. Whilst the concept of online learning is not new, the isolation and perceived imposition of moving to at-home learning can have far reaching detrimental impact on student learning and success. Global Higher education systems have been forced to rethink teaching and learning as a major priority and ensure that students have access to learning and support material when away from campus (Kraus & Moore

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2021). Whilst the focus has been on supporting learning, there appears to be a paucity in research on supporting mental health issues that can occur when learning online.

According to the World Federation of Mental Health, 'Mental health' describes a sense of subjective well-being, the capacity to live in a resourceful and fulfilling manner, having the resilience to cope with the challenges life presents, feeling in control, and being able to take responsibility). Within a university community, the diversity of mental health needs presented by students is challenging and requires suitable responses (Ehterson et.al., 2022; Kraus & Moore 2021; Robinson, 2020).

Trauma-informed pedagogy (Gilbert et al., 2018), for example, has moved from being a small subfield to the front lines, with scholars like Mays Imad taking on heroic roles. Even long-standing research topics, such as how you effectively support students online, take on new meaning when that support is mediated not just through technology, but also through the shared experience of social distancing, work-life balance, and the demands of academic attainment.

One possible mediating factor in helping to dismantle this stranglehold of the loneliness of striving to outdo others in an academically competitive environment, is through peer mentoring. According to Lorenzetti et al. (2019) peer mentoring is supplementing faculty supervision by providing other avenues through which students can obtain essential information and benefit from opportunities to develop skills and experience necessary for higher education success. These relationships can also ameliorate the common feelings of isolation during online learning.

It may be that the setting of goals and expectations in the mentor-mentee relationship has become fundamental to the sustained success of supporting students academically and emotionally online. Students are participants in an education system that trails the empirical science of self-compassion (Gilbert, 2016, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2009; Gilbert et al., 2018; Murtagh, 2018). What happens when some of these students attempt to lead the mentor-mentee conversation away from academic success and toward the underlying personal suffering that is causing the mentee to delay submissions? These are aligned with academic performance, yet the mentor may have insufficient skills to address these difficulties. Subsequently, mentors may also feel deeply uncomfortable to ignore their mentees particularly where counselling services in many universities are increasingly overstretched.

2. Understanding Peer Mentoring

The mentoring interaction provides the mentee with opportunities to bolster specific learning activities including personal development skills such as time management and self-confidence. Kubberød et al. (2018) define peer mentoring as a purposeful interaction between two or more students to facilitate academic and life skill development. Mentoring in higher education exists in different forms such as formal and informal and peer to peer (Beech et al., 2013). These interactions can result in positive outcomes for both the mentee and mentor, including an improvement in academic performance, resilience and increased retention rates (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Collings et al., 2014; Larose et al., 2011). Despite the positive effects of mentoring, there are a significant number of challenges that need to be considered and managed. Hillier et al. (2019) suggest that unsuccessful mentor-mentee relationships can result in adverse emotional effects such as heightened levels of distress and demotivation. Pursuant to this, commitment to the mentoring process can be problematic, for example, when a mentor is no longer able to engage with the process nor support a mentee, feelings of rejection, disappointment and attrition by both mentor and mentee may ensue.

The pandemic crisis presented a host of challenges in moving face-to-face mentoring to an online e-platform (Chong et al., 2020; Neeley et al., 2017) Working online has many benefits and can result in a flexibility that works more comfortably for both the mentor and mentee. The challenge is how best to connect circumstance, curriculum, culture and context within a supportive framework that bridges distance and effectively connects students with support with a variety of supportive resources.

3. The case of the Sports Mentoring and Inclusive Learning Scheme Project [SMILES]

SMILES was designed and developed in response to supporting sports student success and transitions within a widening participation UK university. Predicated upon the principles of good scholarship of teaching and learning [SoTL] practice (Felten, 2013), SMILES uses communities of more experienced students to support and prepare entry students for higher education success.

The aims and outcomes of the SMILES project are multifaceted and include, but not restricted to:

➢ Developing collaborative partnerships within the university schools and programmes by sharing best practice and examining factors for mentoring sustainability and success.
➢ Reducing programme attrition rates and building a sustained success framework.

➢ Providing pre-enrolment mentoring to increase transition/access into higher education
➢ Using peer mentorship at critical points in the academic year to encourage and promote student led learning experiences
➢ Supporting student success and mental health, through innovative use of technologies

SMILES embraces inclusive learning and social enterprise focussing on holistic and civic development of students. The SMILES project is comprised of two key schemes: 1) Peer, and 2) Peer Assisted Student Support [PASS] mentoring. The first simply involves a pastoral facilitative mentoring approach. The second requires the mentor to deliver a small revision session/ or employment interview task following a lecture or academic activity.

4. PASS Classes

Peer assisted study support [PASS] classes run by mentors give mentees the opportunity to actively practise their skills and receive additional revision guidance. This plays an instrumental role in encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. Accessibility to revision classes has changed with the use of online platforms as students are able to join in online, can revisit the recorded version of the class and watch at their own pace. This mode of delivery was particularly helpful during the pandemic period.

The project also uses qualitative data from student and mentor feedback and evaluation forms to measure outcomes as evidenced in the comments below. The evaluation forms are regularly reviewed, and critical feedback is used to identify how these classes can continue to develop. When asked what students enjoyed most about a PASS the responses were increasingly positive as noted below:

Student 1: "The support from my peers and mentors as well as the feeling of accomplishment when we successfully learnt new, challenging material."

Student 2: "The use of padlets and technologies such as the podcasts enabled me to stay and remain connected to my learning. This helped my mental health as I knew there were people who cared about my study"

The diagram below provides an overview of the revised SMILES structure which was introduced during the 2021/2022 academic year to accommodate the project growth. The project witnessed a 47% increase in mentor applications for the 2020/2021 cycle and a 10% increase for the 2021-22 cycle to date. This was due to the pandemic which provided further opportunity to offer on-line support and additional PASS classes. As depicted in Figure 1 below, the project is carefully co-ordinated enabling mentors to liaise with managers and develop inclusive support strategies. The project employs graduates to lead on key activities such as work specific projects i.e. mental health support and outreach. Building on these successes SMILES has, within the last academic cycle 2020 - 2021, witnessed a 17% increase in level 6, final year undergraduate mentors securing graduate jobs (DLHE Survey) and an 21% increase in these mentors entering graduate programmes (see Table 1).

Figure 1
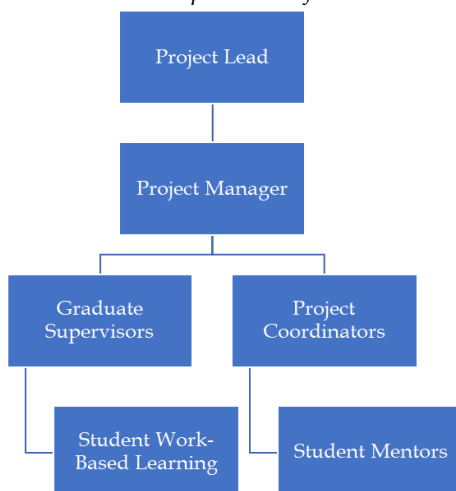*SMILES revised operational flowchart*

Table 1
SMILES quantitative outcomes

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022 (August 2021 – 1st March 2022)
Number of Mentors	5	10	11	23	32	28	25
Number of Mentees	40	55	60	121	220	282	94 (approx.)
% BAME mentees	43	54	54	62	58	58	65
% BAME mentors	40	48	52	63	61	62	48
%Engagement with PASS	80	78	82	83	85	88	95
% Conversion mentee to mentor	62	63	65	68	73	70	75
Average grade of mentees not engaged with SMILES	51.4	50.2	55.3	54	59	61	59
Average grade of mentees engaged with SMILES	62.1	66	72	74.5	76	75.4	78
Average grade attainment of mentors	68	71	72	71	73	74.6	78
% mentors in graduate employment or further study	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note. BAME – Black Asian Ethnic Minorities.

5. Training and Guidance

Jackson et al. (2003) posit that training mentors effectively is critical to the success of a peer mentoring programme. Mentors need to fully recognise and appreciate expectations, boundaries and referral networks. Closely associated with this is the ability of the mentor to communicate professionally with the mentee and understand how best to manage complex situations. Whilst this may appear relatively straightforward in face-to-face situations, the move to online environments is fraught with difficulties. In the online space, mentees can choose to disconnect from conversation or simply end a meeting should the content or support offered malalign with their expectations. Digital literacies, and equally, poverty, is central to how support on-line is managed (Lorenzetti et al, 2019).

All SMILES mentors have an initial interview to discern motivation and rationale for wanting to become a mentor. During this interview, SMILES managers assess mentor suitability, additional support needs and specific roles within the project.

Once accepted as a SMILES mentor, both mentor and mentee undertake a series of training days that cover roles, expectations, behaviours, attitudes, networks of support, recording and notetaking, commitment and impact and more recently trauma informed mentoring. The SMILES manager leads the training ensuring that all participants gain authentic experience of being a mentor. This includes role playing and using technologies to support SMILES activities.

6. Supporting Mental Health through Online Technologies

During the 2021-22 academic period, a project MS Teams page was created with whole department access. This enabled a space to share career development opportunities, academic skills workshops and student events. The introduction of MS TEAMS as a platform not only for mentoring but equally as a resource resulted in an extended community of practice. Mentors were able to receive support from academic and professional staff, whereas mentees were encouraged to use different resources and services to support their learning and success.

Building upon the success of on-line learning and support, SMILES introduced a podcast series in 2019 which was extended in the 2021-22 academic year. This meant that new ways of reaching students electronically became a reality. During the pandemic the podcast series was fundamental in relating experience and expectation to students who felt isolated and disconnected. The themes and content of the podcasts supported strategies for coping with anxiety, distress and adverse life experiences. Each podcast hosted a graduate or appropriate support staff to talk through helpful learning hints and ways to manage a range of mental health issues. Key take home messages were further publicised through the SMILES twitter and Instagram accounts. Initially there appeared to be unilateral process of sharing information. As the pandemic and associated uncertainty about returning to learning unfolded, the engagement with the

podcasts increased. Students reported that the podcasts were their lifeline during learning and seen as a sensitive and enabling technology to inspire learning and deal with the loneliness and isolation of being at home. Some students found the podcasts a wonderful distraction from the reality of their lives as noted by a mature BAME student below:

> The SMILES podcasts enabled me to tune out of my sorrow, and tune into my learning, knowing I was not alone. The support, advice and guidance afforded to me in the podcast inspired me to persevere and continue my study.

In addition to weekly scheduled podcasts, which covered various topics including emotional, health and financial supports available, students were able to request and suggest podcasts that would support their personal situations. The SMILES marketing manager was able to instigate a co-created community of practice which enabled students to work synergistically with the SMILES team to create and produce content for podcasts and social media postings. This resulted in students having agency in supporting other students within and beyond their programme of study. One first year student expressed her appreciation by commenting "being part of supporting others during the pandemic, has helped me cope more effectively with my own life situation".

What became increasingly evident during the pandemic was the reach of the SMILES initiatives. The aim was to provide online support for students within the university, however, broadcasting the podcasts meant that the richness of content became accessible globally. The SMILES team received e-mails of gratitude from students from a range of countries such as USA, Australia, South Africa, India and China. One student paid tribute to the generosity of spirit in affording global students the opportunity to benefit from the SMILES initiatives, "Thank you SMILES for giving me hope in times of despair. I wish our university has a program like this, it would be so relevant in these challenging times"

Whilst the podcast series proved popular and students were able to upload recordings to their phones and devices, the sharing of experience and practice was central to the coping strategies adopted by mentors and mentees. One such innovative use of technology was the padlet. A padlet is a digital wall that allows the posting of ideas and sharing content in a secure and purposeful environment. Padlets have long been used on the sports programme to capture student creativity and enable the narration of their individual and collective learning journeys. To support mental health on-line, the SMILES team repurposed how padlets were used. Here mentors and mentees were able to share specific content and receive feedback in a timely manner. Students felt comfortable using padlets to express their thoughts, anxieties and concerns. Students were empowered to decide who best to share their padlets with. All students were inducted into padlet use and etiquette, and reminded about safeguarding and protecting their personal space. Through the use of padlets, some students were able to reach out to other students and staff in a way they had not personally considered previously. One student expressed herself through art and used the time to capture her experiences. When she bravely decided to share her work, she realised that others had similar feelings and issues. As a result, an online community of practice formed that acted more than a space for meeting, but significantly- a space for sharing and supporting ideas and actions.

SMILES noted that through despair and disruption, opportunity can flourish. The pandemic provided a unique space for the SMILES team to develop a new app. This app enabled students to readily access SMILES support, request mentors, and suggest ideas and themes for podcasts. The app, innovated by one of the SMILES mentors and now graduate, clearly illustrated the lived values of the project. Through SMILES, mentors and mentees experienced what it means to support others. This not only enabled the development of lifelong learning skills but more importantly civic responsibility. As mentors engaged more proactively with SMILES and answered the clarion call for support during unprecedented times, the project developed new ways of working and engaging with student needs. The app now in further development will enable students to connect directly with support services so that they can access additional professional resources to support their mental health and study needs.

Table 2 below illustrates the impact of the SMILES on-line technology usage. In the table we can see the impact and reach of how the use of on-line technologies increased as students recognised the value of engaging on-line.

Table 2
Digital impact of SMILES

	Engagement 2019-2022 (September – November)	Engagement 2019-2022 (November-March)
Anchor/ Podcasts	46 listeners	71 listeners
Instagram	360 accounts reached (+367%)	198 accounts reached
Twitter	53 followers	53 followers
TEAMS	80 active users (14%)	493 active users
Padlets	125 users	206 users
International reach across all technologies	82	251

7. Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Future

This case study has shown that working online, using technologies within a structured and supportive environment can have long lasting positive effect on those involved. Equally, miscommunication and poor management of process can adversely impact student success and widen the divide between achievement and attrition. In designing the SMILES mentoring programme key lessons have been learned. We have noted how informal ideas need to become formalised and that close monitoring of process and product is essential. Below are key recommendations derived from the lessons we have learned and the innovations we have implemented:

➤ Often, challenges can arise in online mentoring spaces and mentors can feel concerned that they are unable to achieve set goals. Training and ongoing professional development opportunities can further assist this to support mentors autonomy in their role.

➤ After a challenging day, it is beneficial to have pre and post meetings to discuss plans for the day ahead, and then debrief at the end of day. These meetings are useful in sharing tips from supervisors, or just general reassurance of the mentoring process.

➤ Design a mentor-mentee contract which is completed in the initial meeting. This can also be used for other peer support initiatives. These contracts highlight important dynamics within mentoring relationships including the roles of a mentor, an approximate period for when the mentoring will occur as well as meeting details. This contract gives the mentee an understanding of expectations and mentor skills and attributes. Additionally, contracts serve as a confidential agreement to ensure safety for both mentor and mentee.

➤ Encourage students to participate in an initial online group mentoring session as this can help bolster confidence in mentees. Being surrounded by other peers in a compassionate, non-judgemental environment who may be experiencing similar thoughts and feelings, will provide mentees with an acknowledgement that they are not alone in their journey.

➤ Use of social media or developing podcasts and videos can create an opportunity for all students, including those who may be struggling to ask for help, to listen to experiences that may be similar to their own. They can also be a place to share other available academic or mental health services and resources that students may be less aware of. Social media and podcast streaming services are often free and easy to use. Additionally, training for effective use of these platforms may generate greater student engagement.

➤ Incorporate online "coffee catch-ups" for project staff and mentors. It is important with these projects that those who are running or managing them feel supported with their mental health and well-being. This can be completed on online platforms such as MS Teams and is an opportunity for all to stay connected especially during challenging and isolating times.

➤ Finally, do not be afraid to explore on-line technologies. Inviting students into the process and respecting their ideas and contributions enables the co-creation of communities of practice and support. This will enhance team work and shared responsibilities within the mentor-mentee partnerships and programmes.

8. Conclusion

Mentoring can be a powerful process to support students and enable their cognitive and civic development. It can equally hinder development and achievement if ill managed. It is possible that some students struggle to overcome initial anxieties about requesting help with their academic studies. Whilst peer mentors are students, it is important to recognise that it can still be daunting to ask for help or advice from a 'stranger'. Collins et al. (2014), identified that trust allows for a more personal interaction between mentor and mentee, leading to an integration of both personal and professional aspects to the relationship. It is therefore

important to dismantle any barriers in creating a safe and welcoming environment for both mentors and mentees to flourish. Being mentored online, from the comfort of one's own home can result in increased engagement with the process whilst fostering a sense of self-confidence.

As we move forward in our adapting educational contexts and recognise the prevalence of hybrid learning, we too need to consider how issues outside of the taught curriculum impact student success. Higher education continues to face challenges in terms of who responsibly supports student needs. With the refocusing of services and reduction in specialist personnel, more responsibility rests with academic staff to deal with complicated issues outside of their training and employment contracts. By carefully planning and embedding mentoring programmes into mainstream academia, a symbiotic relationship can develop where mentors serve to identify issues and flag early support. This can reduce unnecessary distress experienced by students and staff alike. The use of on-line and innovative technologies further has potential to inspire creative ways in managing complex emotional and mental health issues. This chapter has explained one approach and highlighted some points to consider when successfully connecting students to essential support and services in higher education institutions.

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