



A Collaborative Learning Space

Key Words

collaboration, student assistants, peer learning, student engagement

Abstract

The centralised drop-in model of learning support aims to create a supportive and friendly learning environment offering developmental and timely assistance to students from across the University; however, the drop-in team is aware of the need to build a stronger profile and to make the service available to a larger number of students, and in 2014, to increase our service, the Study and Learning Centre (SLC) began to employ student learning assistants (SLAs) to work in the drop-in centre. Initially this challenged our way of working and the SLAs who were employed to work alongside us were largely relegated to the job of meeting and greeting students at the centre... This role of welcoming was successful; until then, the student to student voice had been missing from our work. However, as time has passed, the SLAs have begun to take on a stronger role. Working side by side with the learning advisers, they have developed a strong understanding of the work, seeing more and more clearly the 'gaps' that they can address. The skills and subject areas they are confident to offer assistance with now include calculus, engineering computing, signals and systems, the Adobe suite, Food chemistry and others. These are offered alongside the learning advisers' expertise in writing, reading, English language, study skills, maths, physics and chemistry. Their expertise lessens the waiting time for students, and they continue to identify other areas in which they can provide support. At the SLC drop-in centre, the student to student voice has now successfully mingled with the experienced teaching voice. The latest structural review has moved the SLC group to the RMIT Library, which has provided a different, more visible environment for the drop-in centre. The aim now is for SLAs to work within and around the SLC space, drawing students into the new area. While the impact of the change is positive, the increased visibility may present the challenge of maintaining a caring and productive environment whilst operating within an existing library culture. The team is currently identifying and responding to opportunities to review existing practice with a view to refining and developing the service offered. Evaluation of the drop-in space is captured by regular short email feedback from students. Student feedback typically mentions the friendliness, helpfulness, niceness of the SLAs; their student to student connection makes them dependable allies in the quest for success in the academic environment. In addition, the SLAs themselves are required to reflect, question, develop and share their findings with one another online in writing, developing knowledge and expertise, pushing the role and continuing to engage beyond their shift (Boud, 1985). They capture their own picture of the work done in drop-in, what works, what does not work and what can be improved. Success and failure is all part of the discussion.

References

Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (1985). *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge Falmer