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Tell me a story: a new angle on student mentoring

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Abstract

This paper outlines a Murdoch University equity project entitled, UniLink which invites Year 10 students from a local high school to pair up with undergraduate student mentors from Murdoch University to narrate and record their experiences of university life using youth-friendly media. Year 10 students, who expressed an interest in attending university as a post-school option, were encouraged to attend university for a week and document their experiences, and those of their mentors, using video and stills cameras. Students were invited to interview a range of university staff and students in order to gain a better understanding of university culture and academic life. The videotapes were edited into a composite tape to be used by staff and students in informing other high school students about their experiences and the possibilities offered by a university education. The value of such cross-institutional links and the evaluation of the mentors and mentees is discussed.

Objectives

This paper:

- describes an equity programme which gave Year 10 high school students from a low-transfer school an experiential encounter with Murdoch University;
- discusses the mentoring process, and
- outlines the anticipated outcomes

Beginnings

In Australia links between universities and high schools have been among the long-term strategies employed to encourage tertiary recruitment. Traditionally, the link has centred upon talks by university staff to school students at the high school, followed with a visit to the tertiary campus by the students. Usual targets for this approach have been schools orientated towards academic achievement and tertiary entrance. (King et al. 1993)

Following the identification of specific groups with low levels of access to tertiary education (see *A Fair Chance for All*, 1990) other outreach has occurred specifically targeting schools with low transition rates. Murdoch University's

initial response to this was to define a catchment and present students from schools within that area with the opportunity to apply, via an equity entry scheme, for special consideration of their Tertiary Entrance Score. The resulting programme, the Tertiary Options Project (TOP) now provides opportunity for tertiary entrance to those students who can both demonstrate academic potential and who meet specific equity criteria. This allows a small number of students to commence studies in undergraduate programmes each year.

UniLink – the beginning

A number of the high schools in Murdoch University’s catchment area (Perth’s southwest metropolitan region) have low tertiary transfer rates. Various reasons for this situation present themselves; among them, particularly, lack of tertiary knowledge among peers and family members, with a high number of parents with trade, semi or unskilled backgrounds. (*Perth Social Atlas*, 1996:20). Associated with these indicators is the level of unemployment within sections of the catchment. (op cit: 26-27)

In 1996 a programme was piloted with Hamilton Senior High School. The pilot, which later became known as the UniLink Programme, was modelled on one run at University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) entitled the Shadowing Programme. This programme had demonstrated positive results in encouraging non-English speaking background females into tertiary education by bringing them onto the campus and allowing them to 'shadow' other students for periods during the semester.

Hamilton High was selected for the pilot and the current programme due to its close proximity to the University and also its profile. The school has a student population of 1047 and a teaching staff of 80. It has received funding from the Commonwealth Priority Schools Funding programme in recognition of the particular needs of the student population. Particular equity groups represented in the student profile are recently-arrived migrants and refugees whose first language is not English, Aboriginal students, students with disabilities and particularly those with parents in receipt of government pensions or those on low incomes.

1998 Year 12/Tertiary Entrance Exam (TEE) Student Profile Hamilton Hill (Total Year 12 population 109)

Total Year 12 TEE	43	39% (of total Yr 12s)
Total offered uni. places	22	51%
Total enrolled in uni. programmes	20	47%

Total Year 12 TEE offered university places	22	51%
Institution	No.	% of total (22)
UWA	7	35%
Curtin	8	40%
Murdoch	5	25%
ECU	0	0%

The Programme

The UniLink Programme was held in July this year (1999). This Equity and Student Learning initiative draws on the previous UniLink mentoring project first piloted in 1996/97 and the 'Race Around Edith Cowan University' programme held this year at Edith Cowan University.

In devising this programme it was important to keep in mind the specific target audience. The project team saw the importance of creating a programme that would flow in two directions. Thus it was desirable that it acted both as an encouragement programme for individual Year 10 students to consider continuing into higher education, and that it offered a point of cultural exchange across the two institutions.

With these goals in mind the programme can be said to have two parts. The first is the on-campus week's experience, held this year from 26 – 30 July. Twenty-five Year 10 high school students from Hamilton Senior High spent one week on campus working with university students who were their mentors/campus partners. As a way of increasing the Year 10 students' engagement with the campus environment and the people within, the students were provided with both video and stills cameras.

This project involved the students organising and filming interviews with a diversity of people across the University community. In addition they were asked to create a photo-journal of their week using the stills cameras.

The Students

The students were drawn from the Year 10 sub-schools; self-selected with the encouragement of teaching staff. A maximum number of 25 students was set

due to budget constraints. Information on the programme was sent to parents who also had to sign a permission form for their child to attend.

The Mentors

A call for mentors was made across campus. Initially the programme organisers sought school-leaver entry students but most of those applying were mature-age. This proved not to be a problem with the high school students. There was a good response to the idea of mentoring with 13 students being selected, based on their application statement relating to why they wanted to be involved in the programme. The gender distribution was four men and nine women. (Also more women than men applied.) Four of those who participated were equity-entry students.

Budget

Mentors (Book Vouchers 13@ \$50)	\$650.00
Camera Skills Workshop	\$70.00
Printing	\$38.83
Cameras (Disposables & Prints -- 13 with prints at \$18 each)	\$424.32
Video Cameras (5-day hire x 8 cam recorders)	\$540.00
Project Books(25)	\$52.00
Catering	\$700.00
Total	\$2,475.15

Development of plot: new innovations this year

The Year 10 students were invited to tell a story about their experiences on campus using video cameras and disposable flash cameras. This offered them the opportunity to move from the passive position of being 'shadows' to being active creators of the narrative. In this sense students may be described as authors; they are the constructors of the learning. David Loader talks about this new model of learning as constructivist: "...built by the learner, not supplied by the teacher." (Loader cited by Spender, 1995:110). He is referring to computing, but it applies equally well to other forms of electronic technology such as video making.

In constructing stories, we construct our lives. Today stories are told using different media, but the value of story telling should never be underestimated. Brooks in acknowledging the importance of narrative writes:

"Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories which we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in the story of our own lives that we relate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of future projects, situating ourselves at the intersections of several stories yet to be completed." (1984:3)

Students today are video literate: "...they prefer information to be imparted by video because it is easy to understand after years of playing video games and watching television." (Mc Caughan cited by Spender, 1995:107). Students today decode and construct visual imagery with ease; this process is quite different to reading print or writing and has profound implications for learning and teaching.

Spender together with Lessing holds that "...the very nature of human beings as we have understood them is being transformed." (Spender, 1995:106). Both argue that the revolution that we are experiencing today is as profound as the information revolution experienced when print was introduced. Young people are at the cutting edge of this revolution and the way they see the world and choose to represent it, is affected by their experiences in the electronic revolution.

Video documentary making proved to be a youth-friendly medium that gave the students:

- A high profile on campus - the university community was interested to know what they were doing
- A sense of empowerment - they were taking charge in terms of securing the information - making contact with academics and students; preparing and conducting interviews, taking responsibility for selecting, gathering and recording information
- A sense of excitement and fun - they were thrilled to be learning about the medium and found they could use it in a variety of differing ways.
- A sense of independence and courage (in terms of taking the initiative to communicate with a diverse range of people on campus)

Comments such as these illustrate how the experience was facilitated and mediated by the use of the video cameras

- It was good to independently roam the campus and make our own

production.

- It was a lot of fun filming students and teachers and what they think of the university.
- It was exciting. The video workshop was very helpful.
- I learned how to work in a group and go up to someone I didn't even know and ask questions.
- I learned that it is very easy to make a film and it was very easy to go up to people to interview them.
- I learned that people won't mind if you talk to them, even if you are a complete and total stranger. It was a good co-operation activity.

Preparing secondary and tertiary students for the week

On day one of the UniLink programme, the 13 mentors attended a three-hour mentoring workshop that involved:

- a few 'getting to know you' activities
- a discussion of any mentoring experiences they may have had;
- clarifying the concept of mentoring and what it signifies
- reflecting on the mentees and their needs;
- discussing what is involved in good communication and
- illustrating different learning strategies

In this session, one of the 'getting to know you' activities involved the mentors discussing with a partner the significance to them of their first name. This provoked a lot of animated discussion and alerted the mentors to the importance of names and the emotional connection that people have to them.

Another interesting development that occurred in this workshop was the students' response to the term 'mentor'. We were surprised at the level of resistance to the term and the need for the student to destabilise this construct. This resulted in them hammering out a working definition of how they conceptualised their roles.

The term mentor connoted to them a 'wise sage' who had an elevated position and status. By contrast they saw themselves rather as 'peer pals' or 'campus friends'. They all agreed that they had benefited from the experience of being part of the university community and felt they wanted to make a contribution. They acknowledged that they could do so through sharing their knowledge and understanding. They also believed that there would be a level

of reciprocity and mutuality in their interactions with the high school students.

The comments below made by the mentors provide some indication of expected and unexpected positive outcomes from this kind of on-campus programme.

- I was here at the beginning of the week and I saw all these little separate groups but by Friday they were all together working as a group
- They came out of their little boxes, they came into this environment and they learned to deal with each other
- We said we will be treating you like adults and you are expected to behave as such. Because that expectation was there I believe they rose to the challenge
- The kids all came from different sub-schools and not knowing one another is exactly what (starting) uni is like
- I remember what it was like for me at high school. It was very easy to get into your groups and then go around and insult others that you didn't know. I see that these guys will go back to school and even if they pass in the corridor will at least say "Hi how are you going?"
- What my group appreciated was how over at the Ref. they enjoyed speaking to lots of adults who had come from different walks of life and they enjoyed the concepts thrown at them

Mentees workshop

Due to time constraints and the fact that students were going to have a two-hour workshop on video documentary making on the same morning, this workshop ran for one hour.

The workshop was designed to mirror the workshop for mentors insofar as we played some 'getting to know you games' which acted as an ice-breaker. We were unaware at the time of conducting this workshop that many of the Year 10 students did not know each other as they came from different sub-schools. Had we known this, we would have extended these activities. The high school students were asked to discuss, in groups, what they thought the terms mentor and mentee meant and how they saw their role on campus. They appeared to be less resistant to the terms, but did conceptualise the mentor as a wise person who could guide them while they were at university.

The students were also asked to discuss what they believed good communication skills to be. This concluded the session.

Video documentary-making workshop.

This session was organised so that the high school students would understand the fundamental principles of video documentary making. It was conducted by Linda Butcher, the Video Producer from the Teaching and Learning Centre at Murdoch University. Eight video cameras had been hired and students (in groups of three) were experientially given the opportunity to discover the role of light in film-making, the importance of camera angles the difference between close-ups and long-shots, the use of sound and the role it plays etcetera. The students were engaged in the process and their comments in the evaluation of the workshop testify to this:

- I thought that this was useful because I didn't know how to use a camera.
- I learned how to use a video camera to make good close-ups and wide shots while I was filming, and I learned how to set up the cameras and use them properly.
- I learned how to pan and how the light affects what you are filming.
- I learned lots from the workshop. I was able to work out how to use a camera.

One of the difficulties we encountered and had not anticipated was that the students wanted to be able to view and edit their film-making.

While those students with the Panasonic video cameras were able to view their work on a video recorder, those who had been allocated the smaller, easily-portable video cameras, found that they were unable to do so. This resulted in some disgruntled students who wanted to complete the project and found that we did not have the facilities for them to do that.

We dealt with this as best we could in the situation by asking the students to suggest what they valued on their video tapes in writing. In the final construction of a composite tape (edited by Chris Twomey) we attempted to honour some of their wishes.

This tape will be returned to the school so that other students can gain an insight into the experiences of this Year 10 cohort.

Future developments: the never-ending story

In July of this year we were successful in our application for an Innovative Programme Grant from the Teaching and Learning Centre in order to be able to extend the project.

The proposal aims to strengthen the link between high school students participating in the Unilink programme and the university through an active and continuing mentoring programme, which endures after the students' one week participation in the programme on campus.

We propose to build on the existing Unilink programme by linking each student with a member of academic staff and establishing and supporting their ongoing communication through e-mail contact. The relationship between Unilink student mentors and their high school mentees will also be extended by the same means.

We anticipate that the academic staff member will provide career and course advice as well as appropriate study advice, whereas the undergraduate mentor will provide on-going encouragement and support within the academic context.

These relationships will be further strengthened by arranging bi-annual contact between mentors and mentees in the form of a social occasion, such as a luncheon for all participants.

(Russell Elsegood, the coordinator of the STAR Programme, has been consulted and has agreed to collaborate with the mentoring programme in the recruitment of peer tutors from the STAR Programme. He has also indicated that he will assist in the development of future grant applications and will provide access to computer facilities for peer mentors).

The second part of the programme will be to establish a website (attached to the Murdoch University Student Learning website) which offers secondary school students at the Unilink pilot school a bulletin board, chat facilities and hotlinks to other sites, such as national student learning sites.

In addition, we intend to initiate video conferencing so that contact between the high school students and their mentors can occur in 'real time'.

Finally, the project will add to the existing process evaluation of the Unilink programme by the inclusion of a baseline questionnaire and the development of mechanisms to follow-up students through to their enrolment in university or other post-secondary career options.

The mentoring, video conferencing and website arrangements will be piloted with Hamilton Senior High School with a view to being extended to other schools if found to have been effective. While the follow-up evaluation component will initially extend to the end of the current academic year, the collection of baseline and six-month follow-up data will facilitate opportunities for securing funding from other sources to enable longer term follow-up and the extension of the programme to other low-transfer schools.

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