

TRANSITION IN TRANSITION OUT (TITO): USING PEER MENTORING TO ASSIST GRADUATING STUDENTS TRANSITION BEYOND UNIVERSITY

Sophia Xenos¹, Andrea Chester¹, & Lorelle Burton²

¹*School of Health Sciences, RMIT University (Australia)*

²*Department of Psychology, University of Southern Queensland (Australia)*

Abstract

Contemplating entry into the workforce can be a daunting process for students as they prepare to complete their undergraduate degree. Final year psychology students can find this process particularly challenging, given that many do not proceed into postgraduate psychology programs and are left to contemplate their options. It is clear that assisting students in this period of transition and improving their work preparedness skills is crucial. This project used a repeated-measures within-subject design to deliver a peer mentoring program across two Australian universities, one face-to-face (RMIT University) and one online (University of Southern Queensland). In the program, final year psychology students mentor first year students and, through this process, develop important work preparedness skills that can be used in their later transition into the workplace. This paper will focus on the impact of the program on the third year student experience, including their preparedness for life beyond their undergraduate degree. The paper will report on the pre- and post-test scores for third year students on measures exploring the five senses of success, learning approaches, preparedness for entry into the workforce, and perceptions of peer mentoring.

Keywords: *Transition, University, Peer Mentoring*

1 Background

The issues characteristic of the first year experience have been previously well documented including high attrition rates, lowered academic performance, lowered social support, and impact on student wellbeing (Wilson & Lizio, 2008; Kift, 2009; Tinto, 2000, Krause, 2005). As a consequence, many educators have highlighted the importance of engaging students, connecting them with staff and each other, and providing meaningful feedback early in their first year of study (ACER, 2009; Sudano & Chester, 2009; Quinlivan & Xenos, 2010). In comparison, the transition issues for final year undergraduate students have been less well understood, although considerable work has been conducted on graduate attributes and work-integrated learning as preparation for transition out of university (e.g., Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009). While many students successfully enrol in postgraduate study, a large proportion exit university after the completion of their undergraduate degree and often leave without a professional identity and feeling poorly prepared for their career (Cranney & Dunn, 2011). Providing meaningful work-integrated learning for undergraduate students is therefore crucial.

2 The TiTo model

According to Lizzio's (2012) lifecycle, final year students are less concerned with their 'student identity' and are more focused on negotiating their 'graduate and professional identity'. The peer mentoring model that was developed, known as Transition In Transition out (TiTo), was therefore designed to better support graduating students as they transition out of university and into the workforce or further study and assist them to develop their graduate identity.

The TiTo model is flexible, with the capacity to be adapted for both face-to-face and blended learning contexts. In the face-to-face TiTo model that is the focus of this paper, peer-mentoring was embedded into a third year capstone course, providing final year students, regardless of GPA, with the option to volunteer as a mentor to a first year student as a way of further consolidating their knowledge of psychological

concepts, build professional capabilities and experience, demonstrate achievement of graduate attributes, and importantly, through a series of self-reflective exercises, reflect on their own career aspirations and professional identity. Mentors were provided with an intensive training package, supplemented by weekly classes to prepare, debrief, and share ideas. In the blended learning (online) context, mentors received ongoing support throughout the program via weekly online real-time sessions facilitated by their third year lecturer. Thus, the TiTo program provided third year psychology students with an opportunity to master knowledge and understanding of key psychological content, develop their leadership skills by facilitating small group discussions, and reflect critically on their learning experiences during the program.

Mentoring was integrated into the first year curriculum and provided to all first year students in face-to-face classes. The third year mentors worked with a small group of five to six first year students on the development of skills to support completion of assessment tasks for eight weeks of the semester. Mentors attended the second hour of tutorials and worked with the students, while the tutor stayed in the room. The focus for mentors was on supporting academic skill development to assist first year students to complete their assessment on time and with confidence. Psychosocial transition issues were also explored, such as building connections to other students, as well as practical aspects such as access to support services.

Crucial to the face-to-face delivery of TiTo were the first year tutors, who remained in the first year tutorials while the mentors worked with the student groups. Tutors attended the mentor training to meet their group of mentors and during the semester provided timely feedback to mentors based on observations in class and contributed a small component of the third year students' mentoring practice grade. Tutors also provided their mentors with a written reference at the completion of the semester. For the online context, the first year course examiner provided guidance and advice to the third year mentors and had general access to all mentor group discussions.

The TiTo model was developed from a sound pedagogical base, bringing together two overlapping frameworks to support the transition, engagement, and learning of students:

2.1 The Five Senses of Success framework (Lizzio, 2006)

This framework highlights the major predictors of student success, and suggests that succeeding as an undergraduate student involves helping students build capacity across five areas: capability (understanding the student role; mastering academic knowledge and skills), connectedness (building relationships with peers and staff; identifying with the university), purpose (setting realistic goals; engaging with the discipline; developing a sense of vocation), resourcefulness (knowing about university resources and procedures; balancing work, life, and study), and culture (appreciating the core values and ethical principles of higher education). Helping students build capacity in each of these five areas is a complex task and unlikely to be accomplished by a single initiative. Nevertheless, TiTo was designed to address all five needs for third year mentors.

2.2 Deep, Surface, and Strategic Approaches to Learning (Entwistle, 2000)

Together with a focus on the five senses of success, TiTo was explicitly designed to support the development of productive approaches to learning. Entwistle's (2000) tripartite model of deep, strategic, and surface learning was employed. According to this model, a **deep approach** to learning is associated with a desire to understand material, a tendency to link ideas and seek relationships to other knowledge, the use of evidence to draw conclusions, and an intrinsic motivation for study. The **strategic approach** is associated with time management and planning, confidence, competitiveness, consciousness of the assessment demands, and a capacity to monitor progress. A **surface approach** is characterised by lack of direction,

reliance on rote learning, and fear of failure (Walker, Spronken-Smith, Bond, McDonald, Reynolds, & McMartin, 2010). While small but significant changes over time have been documented in deep, strategic and surface learning amongst first year students following purposeful curriculum change (e.g., Walker et al, 2010), it was anticipated that helping third year mentors better understand these aspects of learning would also result in improvements in these areas for these students.

2.3 Research Aims

This current paper reports on the effectiveness of the TiTo model in supporting transition and improving work preparedness skills for third year students as they contemplate life beyond university. The model was implemented and tested in two different university contexts. The first was a large urban university, RMIT University, which has a student cohort of more than 70,000 based on several campuses in urban Melbourne and off-shore. The second university was the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), a smaller regional provider, with approximately 25,000 students spread across three campuses in the south-east of Queensland. USQ has a particular expertise in online delivery, with more than 75% of students studying off-campus. It was hypothesised that by the end of the TiTo program, the third year students would show enhancements on the five senses of success, improved scores on deep and strategic learning, and importantly increased preparedness for entry into the workforce or life beyond university.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

This paper presents data from one university, RMIT University, where classes were provided on campus. Of the 53 students in the third year course, 39 choose the mentoring option and 34 (23, females and 11 males) provided pre and post-test data for the project. The surveys were embedded into assessment tasks. The average age of the third year mentors was 21.68 years ($SD=2.64$). The demographic characteristics of the mentors is representative of the undergraduate psychology population at this metropolitan Australian university.

3.2 Measures

The third year students were surveyed at the beginning and end of semester on a range of measures. The two measures reported in this paper are described below:

Five senses of success

The Five Senses scale was adapted from the work of Lizzio (2006). The scale consisted of 73 items measuring the five subscales of capability (21 items), connectedness (16 items), purpose (12 items), resourcefulness (19 items) and culture (5 items). All items are responded to on a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = strongly disagree$ to $5 = strongly agree$). The psychometric properties of the five subscales show satisfactory internal reliability estimates ranging from .80 for culture to .92 for capability (Sharrock, 2011). The internal consistencies of the sub-scales in the present study were capability $\alpha = .91$, connectedness $\alpha = .87$, purpose $\alpha = .85$, resourcefulness $\alpha = .90$ and culture $\alpha = .80$.

Learning approaches

The three learning approaches were measured using the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST; Entwistle 2000). The scale includes 52 items, each of which is answered on a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = agree$ to $5 = disagree$). The ASSIST has demonstrated a sound factorial structure as well as good internal reliability and predictive validity (Gadelrab, 2011). The internal consistencies of the three learning approaches scales in the present study were deep $\alpha = .85$, strategic $\alpha = .86$ and surface $\alpha = .79$.

Peer mentoring evaluation

Three forced-choice questions were administered to evaluate student perceptions of the peer mentoring program, as follows: (1) Peer mentoring helped the

quality of my work.; (2) Peer mentoring helped me feel like I belong.; (3) I enjoyed peer mentoring. Each question was answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

4 Results

4.1 Senses of Success

Table 1 shows increases on four of the five senses of success over the course of the semester for third year students. Repeated measures t-tests revealed significant increases on connectedness (with a moderate effect size), resourcefulness, capability, and purpose. No change was observed on the dimension of culture.

Table 1.

Repeated Measures t-test Five Senses of Success Scores for Third Year Students

	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)			
Third Year			<i>t</i> (33)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Connectedness	3.92 (.60)	4.19 (.56)	-3.88	<.001	-.47
Culture	4.34 (.56)	4.34 (.54)	-.08	.938	.00
Resourcefulness	3.88 (.51)	4.07 (.59)	-2.61	<.05	.34
Capability	3.90 (.51)	4.06 (.57)	2.29	<.05	-.30
Purpose	3.77 (.68)	4.00 (.59)	2.61	<.05	-.36

Note. All subscales measured on 5-point scale 1 = disagree, 5 = agree

4.2 Learning Approaches

At the beginning of the semester, third year students reported lower deep and strategic mean scores and higher surface learning scores. However, by the end of semester, significant and large increases were observed in deep and strategic learning, and a small and non-significant decrease was noted in surface learning.

Table 2

Repeated Measures t-test Learning Approach Scores for Third Year Students

Learning approach	Pre-test	Post-test			
	M (SD)	M (SD)			
Third Year			<i>t</i> (33)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Deep	2.34 (.62)	3.83 (.51)	-8.37	<.001	-2.63
Strategic	2.55 (.81)	3.74 (.52)	-6.11	<.001	-1.75
Surface	2.99 (.59)	2.80 (.57)	1.06	.30	.33

Note. Possible score range for all items was 1-5.

4.3 Year Student Evaluation of TiTo

Third year mentors evaluated the program extremely favourably. All the mentors enjoyed the program. The majority perceived the program to support their academic work (85%) and nearly all (94%) felt it helped their sense of belonging.

The quantitative data summarised above was supplemented by responses to open-ended questions about the best aspects of the mentoring program. Perceived to be most helpful was assisting mentors in the development of a sense of purpose and skill development. As one student commented, "the mentor program helped me build up on vital life skills in leadership and communication...it was rewarding learning how to facilitate a group because I can see how that will be used in my career". Also rated highly were self-awareness and self-reflection and better insight into teaching and lecturing. As one student noted, "it was helpful to reflect on the concepts and advice I was providing the first year students as it applied to myself", and be more self aware of my strengths and weaknesses and most importantly how I could improve my approach".

5. Discussion

Overall the TiTo program produced positive changes for the third year mentors. Increases were observed in mentors' sense of purpose and vocation, as well as connectedness to peers, staff, and the broader university, and enhanced understanding of the university resources and procedures. This increased sense of vocation and preparation for life beyond university is particularly pleasing, and provides evidence that the TiTo model provides the third year students with an opportunity to improve their work-preparedness skills and reflect on their graduate identity. This was also substantiated by the qualitative data.

In addition, the TiTo program provided the mentors with an opportunity to further consolidate their knowledge of psychological concepts. It is likely that in supporting the learning of their first year mentees, the mentors are able to consolidate and enhance their own knowledge and thus enhance their confidence and leadership skills. Indeed, this was substantiated by the qualitative data, with 85% of mentors reporting that their participation in the program had improved the quality of their work.

The TiTo program was also associated with significant change on the mentors' learning approaches, with an increase in deep and strategic learning noted. This is an important change as deeper learning can assist the third year students with applying their academic skills into the work domain and ultimately help in their transition beyond university.

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