

Finding balance: the positives and negatives of moving peer mentor training online

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Presentation abstract

The Student Academic Mentor (SAM) programme at the London School of Economics has only been in place for five years, and in that time, it has rapidly grown in scope and numbers. With the pandemic, training of the largely international cohort of undergraduates moved online and in-person training was removed. This continued in 2020/21. The result is a trained cohort, but a disconnection between the student volunteer and the programme co-ordinator. In a Learning Development context, with the new landscape of HE emphasising hybridity, where do we find the balance between practical necessity and losing our personal touch with students?

Community response

There were two key messages for me from this presentation. Firstly, timing is a critical factor when engaging students. This often creates conflicts and impedes progress. Asynchronous online learning can help to circumvent these issues but at the cost of personal interaction. Another important thing raised here was how online training had made the project more accessible to students. I think this is a really good thing to come out of having to move delivery online and it would perhaps be a backwards step (in terms of accessibility) to remove this option going forward.

The second take-home message is that it is ok not to love every project on which you work. My key takeaway from this session was that it is ok not to have all the answers, but that it is important to keep reflecting on our work, and presenting at the ALDinHE conference allows you space to achieve this. Jenny's thoughts about whether an element of personal dissatisfaction is ok if the project is working as intended is so interesting! I

think we are constantly seeking to be professionally, creatively, intellectually or socially fulfilled, but sometimes this does not lead to the best delivery of learning, and we need to accept that at times the best solution for the students may 'feel' lacking. I could have talked about this idea so much more. Excellent observations.

I found it reassuring to hear somebody talk about how you can be disappointed in a project and that you do not always love everything you might work on. It was refreshing to hear someone talk openly about their dissatisfaction with a project, even when it had gone as intended. We are often so caught up in trying to ensure our projects are great and that they are ultimately an enjoyable experience for the student, that we forget that we might not be enjoying the experience ourselves. My experience has always been that if the teacher is enjoying the experience, the learner will respond to that and often enjoy it more too. However, we will not always be satisfied by the work that we do, so will always have to 'fake it' to an extent. This made me realise how important it is to have the time and space to reflect on our practice; to think about what we enjoy and to question why we might not too.

Author's reflection

This talk evolved quite significantly in the process of me putting it together, something which I imagine is a common experience for many people putting these types of talks together after submitting the abstract! But I found that evolution quite helpful because it allowed to reflect on, and in many ways process, many of the feelings I had been having with dealing with our new hybrid ways of working. I have realised, as I stated in the final talk, that I do not really think, at present anyway, that as Learning Developers we will find the right kind of balance between in-person and online delivery of our work, and that it is ok, actually, that we have not got the balance right yet because we are all still very much finding our feet with this new way of working. I have also come to the realisation that the biggest draw of our work for the type of people who do it is the students we support, and that with online learning there will continue to be an element of distance between us and the student that may increase our feelings of dissatisfaction. But again, that is ok, it is to be expected. And again, all we can do is try to find ways to work through it and grab the opportunities for the moments that do bring us satisfaction – the chance chat with a

passing student, the moments when someone takes the time to tell you they got a better grade, or that your support really helped – where we can!

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