

# **A Sense of belonging: Guidelines and tools for training student-to-student peer mentoring**

Caroline Rawlings and Ron Grant<sup>1</sup>  
Open Polytechnic  
New Zealand

## **Abstract**

Supporting tertiary students in an open and distance learning environment constantly presents challenges. At the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, the Learning Centre and Te Kura Wānanga (Māori Office) are continually searching and developing innovative and creative ways to tautoko/support students who nominate distance learning as their preferred means of study. The Telephone Peer Support programme (Ron Grant) and Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging Project (Caroline Rawlings) are core components of both Learning Centre and Te Kura Wānanga's register of support programmes. The Telephone Peer Support programme has been tested, re-defined and re-designed over a number of years. It is the distance learning equivalent of 'face-to-face' contact: simple to implement and cost effective. The Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging project is a newer initiative and is in its infancy stage. This project has been designed for first-time Māori students to support their learning in a way that acknowledges cultural needs. Both projects have been Hub-funded by Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, which promotes and supports effective teaching and learning across the entire tertiary sector in New Zealand. Both projects embrace kaupapa Māori principles and values, and are designed to improve engagement, retention, progression and success for all learners at the Open Polytechnic.

## **Telephone peer support programme: Background**

The Telephone Peer Support programme uses a model suggested by Ormond Simpson (2008), tested in similar overseas learning environments and shown to elicit a positive effect on student completion (Boyle, Kwon, Ross & Simpson, 2010). Simpson applied the principles of positive psychology to regular phone conversations with distance students, encouraging strengths-based conversations.

Simpson (2008) argued that the traditional method of concentrating on weakness was not an effective way of improving performance: People do better when they focus on their strengths. Simpson (2008) also suggested that the peer mentors should concentrate on emphasising the positive during initial contact, focusing on existing

---

<sup>1</sup> Rawlings, C., & Grant, G. (2010). A sense of belonging: Guidelines and tools for training student-to-student peer mentoring. In J. Batchelor, & L. Roche (Eds.), *Student success and retention: Sharing and evaluating best practice: Proceedings of the 2010 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 37-46). Auckland, New Zealand: ATLAANZ.

competencies or strengths, drawing out past successes and validating ‘effort’ over achievement. He noted that successful people find or invent ways to apply strengths to their study; thus the key to success is to identify and build on existing talents.

Students are contacted by peer mentors at the commencement of the course (encouraging initial engagement), as well as during key assignment periods, to provide motivation and reassurance. Peer mentors need to lead meaningful learning conversations with students and this is reflected in the careful selection and training process of mentor staff. Each peer mentor has a successful tertiary background, and is an advanced (second- or third-year) student, ideally with some distance learning experience. Aside from empathising with the study experience, peer mentors need to be self-confident, enthusiastic and culturally aware, with patience and an ability to work individually and collaboratively. Ten to fifteen peer mentors are employed per year, with an average of seven present during each shift.

Between 2008 and 2010, peer mentors concentrated on contacting students in identified course areas, mainly those synonymous with low completions. In 2011, due to the change in the strategic focus of the Open Polytechnic, the focus altered and the goal became to contact all students in their first enrolment with the Open Polytechnic.

The peer mentoring team uses a script to guide each conversation with a student (see Appendix A). By using a strengths-based approach, the peer mentors discuss positive aspects of a student’s study (“tell me about your goals for your study” and “tell me about your past successes”), and avoid using a deficit model (“got any problems with your course/study?”). Mentors use this strategy to open a positive dialogue with students. No course-specific information is covered (overstepping the role of course tutors) but a mentor may guide a student in the right direction for assistance, should any difficulties be mentioned.

## **Contacting students**

Most distance students study out of work hours. Some institutions rely on part-time staff contacting students from home. They work in isolation, with no support from a supervisor or fellow peer mentors. Open Polytechnic peer mentors work in the evening (6pm-9pm) four nights per week. A supervisor is present to offer advice that is immediate and conversation-specific. By working on the same site, mentors can utilise the knowledge of each other and, in some cases, of course tutors who are housed in the same building (if working after hours).

## **Training**

All training takes place on site, led by the project manager and specialist staff. This is both planned and spontaneous, determined by the needs of callers and students. Impromptu training sessions are frequent. For example, in mid-2010 mentors were questioned regularly by psychology students about laboratory reports. One peer

mentor, an advanced Psychology student, ran training for peer mentor colleagues in order to explain and demonstrate one of these reports.

Training for peer mentors is on-going: The team starts each evening with a briefing on the evening's calls and to follow up any trends or concerns from previous call lists. It has been noted that for the telephone, 82% of the information gathered comes from the tone of the caller's voice (Koneya & Barbour, 1976) and it is important that the peer mentors are motivated themselves and sound interested and engaged when they talk to students. The briefing helps to achieve this.

Three 'classroom' sessions are undertaken at the beginning of the year for all new peer mentors, as well as acting as a refresher for more experienced callers. These sessions are run before any student contact commences. The first session provides a general introduction to the Open Polytechnic, student demographics, how the institution operates, programmes and courses of significance, reasons for student contact and where to send student administrative requests. The second session outlines Simpson's (2008) strengths-based approach and positive psychology methodology. Mentors are introduced to the written script that is used to facilitate learning conversations, and learn to develop a 'conversational technique' to avoid simply asking a list of questions. This second session also covers telephone protocol (what to say and what to avoid saying on the telephone), as well as how to record notes post-call. It is important that these notes cover the key elements of a conversation, and time is spent on perfecting this skill. Coping with difficult students is discussed at this point, though practical training follows later in the learning process. A third classroom session is facilitated by the Māori Learning Liaison Adviser. This is conducted over a number of sessions outlining strategies that engage Māori and Pasifika students in a culturally relevant manner (Ross, 2008).

From the first day, trainee peer mentors are teamed with more experienced peer mentors who will sit and work with them for most of their training time (about two weeks). New peer mentors need to learn how to use a number of systems and processes at the outset—the telephone system, the Student Management System, and 'Inmagic' (where student information and discussions are recorded). These are vital parts of every work shift. Only when both project manager and new peer mentor feel they are ready does that trainee 'go solo' as a caller. A new peer mentor will have listened to many phone calls before they actually make one. All students being contacted are informed about this process and can opt out of having the call listened to by the trainee. Trainees also make practice calls to the project manager, who will try to replicate various contact scenarios—'the non-cooperative student', 'students with personal issues', and the bright, cheerful, 'onto it' student.

The team attempts to contact students up to three times in a round of calling. If they are not successful, it is noted and an email may be sent. The main points covered in each conversation are noted on the 'Inmagic' database by the peer mentor. Any actions required are followed up by the project manager the next day.

## Results

When surveyed at the end of semester one in 2011, 96% of 130 students commented that peer support contact had helped them in some way. Many of those surveyed said mentor conversations had motivated students and encouraged engagement with their learning. Most importantly, many reported an increased sense of belonging to the polytechnic.

### Student voices

The best thing about the course was the surprise phone calls that kept me on track and motivated.

The phone calls were encouraging, positive and came at the right time.

## Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging project: Background

Support for Māori students, particularly at the beginning of the first year of study, has a positive impact on student performance (Earle, 2007). Māori distance learners should never feel isolated from their institution, tutor or other students. The need for a sense of belonging and connection is a strong value for Māori and can be enhanced through contextualising culturally relevant support in the tertiary sector (Ross, 2008). Students' self confidence is improved when they feel connected and accepted, and that they belong: Self-confidence fosters learning competence. When students feel confident and competent in their learning, they become more efficient and effective learners.

Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging is an online mentoring space (whare) for Māori students to connect and establish relationships with other Māori students at the Open Polytechnic. It's about whakawhanaungatanga<sup>2</sup> in cyber space. Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging aims to facilitate a sense of belonging (whanaungatanga) and a place of belonging (tūrangawaewae) for Māori learners. Evidence from previous studies at the Open Polytechnic has indicated that Māori learners consider 'a sense of belonging' and 'a place of belonging' as strong factors for engagement, retention and progression (Ross, 2008). It is a 'space' for Māori, by Māori, and an opportunity for Māori learners to 'be' Māori. Tuākana-tēina is not a new concept within kaupapa Māori: It literally means 'older sibling looking after younger sibling'. In a learning context, Tuākana-tēina connotes a more experienced student looking after, mentoring or guiding the new learner in a holistic manner. Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging is a culturally relevant support programme that meets not only the students' learning needs but also their cultural needs.

---

<sup>2</sup> Whakawhanaungatanga = building relationships

Peer mentoring is well established as an effective support strategy in tertiary education (Hook, Waaka, & Raumati, 2007; Keel, 2009; Middleton, 2007), and mentoring programmes have a positive impact on the engagement and retention of distance learners (Boyle et al., 2010). While a number of peer mentoring projects have been developed for students at the tertiary level (Manukau Institute of Technology, 2009; Pukepuke & Nash, 2009; Tahau-Hodges, 2010), much is yet to be created for first-time, first-year Māori learners in the open and distance sector. This is particularly true within the online environment, which is an untapped potential hub of peer mentor activity.

Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging aims to dissolve some of the challenges Māori students face in a distance learning environment by using Māori pedagogy to enhance learning. Peer mentoring via the online environment has the potential to reach large numbers of students, and to be developed easily and cost effectively. It can be utilised within both distance and campus-based learning environments, with different groups of students, across various disciplines and levels of study.

Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging is based on a number of theoretical frameworks: Māori pedagogy, distance learning, student support and peer mentoring. Each contributes to providing culturally relevant support for Māori learners in the open and distance learning sector.

## **The students**

Ngā tuākana (student mentors) were experienced learners who were invited to participate in this project. Non curricula specific, these were fellow students willing to tautoko (support) a small group of tēina (student ‘mentees’). A pānui (invitation) was sent to these students via email inviting them to participate in the project. They were sent information detailing the project, as well as a consent form. Each student was asked to participate in an online tuākana training programme with other mentors prior to the start of the project. Much time was taken contacting the students via telephone calls, a most worthwhile process: the telephone is the nearest ‘thing’ we have to a ‘face-to-face’ conversation with students in the open, flexible and distance learning environment. The tuākana mentored up to four first-time first-year Open Polytechnic students. Tuākana involvement required approximately two hours per week.

Ngā tēina (mentees) were first-time first-year Māori students studying at the Open Polytechnic. As with the tuākana, the tēina were invited to participate in the project by phone. This conversation was followed up by an email explaining the programme in detail, along with a consent form which was signed and returned to the project manager. Once the consent form was returned, each teina was then allocated to a tuakana.

## Designing an online mentoring space

Karaitiana Wilson, a Flexible Learning Advisor at the Open Polytechnic, was approached to design an online mentoring space that reflected a dual purpose. The space needed to encourage academic learning as well as replicating the values, principles and kawa of a marae complex. Key Māori concepts were identified as needing to be overtly recognised in the online mentoring space, for example: whānau, aroha, manaakitanga, rangatiratanga, kotahitanga, and kaitiakitanga. Using the Moodle platform, Karaitiana designed a space that captured all these Māori concepts, housed through the Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging programme. The name of the Māori space is now known as ‘iWhare’—a name that reflects 21<sup>st</sup> century e-learning incorporating kaupapa Māori pedagogy.

## The training framework

The success of the training programme was dependent on a number of learning and teaching principles that interlocked cohesively. As the training was in an online environment (which is unlike a face-to-face context), much consideration had to be given to the training format to ensure students were engaged in the training and that the end product produced ‘trained tuākana’. To have a positive outcome for Māori learners at the Open Polytechnic, the following concessions and modifications needed to be taken into consideration for Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging:

1. The need to replicate konohi ki te konohi concept (face-to-face context);
2. The implementation of Māori pedagogy in an online environment;
3. The facilitation of online kōrero using kaupapa Māori concepts;
4. Taking into account the concept of ‘being Māori’;
5. ‘Stair casing’ each training module to maximise both learning and training;
6. Interlinking training modules in a way that was motivating, engaging and fun; and
7. The need for the online environment to have a visual impact that reflected our Māori heritage.

Six training modules were identified for the programme, encapsulating the above principles and, at the same time, applying kaupapa Māori and e-learning practices for a successful study experience. The training modules consisted of the following:

1. Whakapapa—relationship building
2. Tautoko—support
3. Āhuatanga—essential qualities
4. Whakatūnga—strengthening the role of a tuākana
5. Manaakitanga—responsibility
6. Whanaungatanga—sense of belonging.

(See Appendix B for an example of a training module.)

These training modules are linked to the Open Polytechnic Māori Strategy Plan 2011-2013, which sets out the key objectives for achieving the engagement, retention, progression and success of Māori students.

All tuākana had to complete each of the training modules before they could ‘qualify’ to tautoko (support/mentor) any tēina. The tuākana had to post their kōrero (discussion) to an online forum. There are three forums in the iWhare and each forum has a different purpose. For many Māori learners, learning to ‘post’ to a forum is a new learning experience and for some students this can be an intimidating and daunting encounter. By getting the tuākana to post their training kōrero online, their work became a model of learning for the tēina. This form of role-modelling allowed students to participate in learning activities in a safe and supportive manner.

The tuākana training schedule had been estimated to take two weeks but took longer because students were not only having conversations about their study, learning needs and aspirations, but also having long conversations about their whakapapa, te reo and tikanga—cultural needs.

The Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging is a model of learning and support. It is a new initiative, unique to the tertiary sector and designed to support (tautoko) and encourage (manaaki) Māori learners through their study. It is the intention of this study to give Māori students a ‘sense of belonging’ (whanaungatanga) and ‘a place of belonging’ (tūrangawaewae) while studying at the Open Polytechnic.

## **Conclusion**

Tertiary institutions are continually looking for innovative ways to support their learners, and student-to-student mentoring is a useful model being used by the tertiary sector. The Telephone Peer Support Programme is now the cornerstone of student support at the Open Polytechnic, while the Tuākana-tēina e-Belonging project is just beginning its journey. Both support programmes are based on successful theoretical frameworks: They are learner-centric, designed for distance learners, and designed to improve engagement, retention, progression and success for all learners at the Open Polytechnic.

## **References**

- Boyle, F., Kwon, J., Ross, C., & Simpson, O. (2010). Student-student mentoring for retention and engagement in distance education. *Open Learning*, 25(2), 115-130.
- Earle, D. (2007). *Te whai i ngā taumata atakura: Support Māori achievement in bachelors degrees*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

- Hook, G., Waaka, T., & Raumati, L. (2007). Mentoring Māori within a Pākehā framework. *MAI Review*, (3), 1-13.
- Keel, M. (2009). *Mentoring: Program development, relationships and outcomes*. New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers.
- Koneya, M., & Barbour, A. (1976). *Louder than words: Nonverbal communication*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Manukau Institute of Technology. (2009). *Mentoring guidelines*. Retrieved 17 January, 2011, from <http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/ako-hub/ako-aotearoa-northern-hub/resources/pages/mentoring-guidelines>
- Middleton, S. (2007). Mentoring and teaching in academic settings: Professional and cultural identities from one Pākehā's perspective. *Mai Review*, (3), 1-6.
- Pukepuke, T., & Nash, S. (2009). *Peer mentoring of at-distance students: A resource for tertiary institutions*. Retrieved 14 February, 2011, from <http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/ako-hub/ako-aotearoa-central-hub/resources/pages/peer-mentoring-distance-students-resource-tertiary-0>
- Ross, C. (2008). *Culturally relevant peer support for Māori and Pasifika student engagement, retention and success: A programme report*. Wellington, New Zealand: The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.
- Simpson, O. (2008). Motivating learners in open and distance learning: Do we need a new theory of learner support? *Open Learning*, 23(3), 159-170.
- Tahau-Hodges, P. (2010). *Kaiako Pono: Mentoring for Māori learners in the tertiary sector*. Retrieved 18 January, 2011, from <http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-4/kaiako-pono-mentoring-for-maori-learners-in-the-tertiary-sector---full-report.pdf>

## **Appendix A. Telephone script**

### **Learning Centre—Student Mentoring Programme 2011**

#### **Trimester course script: Call 1**

*Introduction: Kia ora / Hello, I'm Jane, a peer mentor from the Learning Centre at the Open Polytechnic. I'm calling about your ..... (name).....course. Is this a good time to call?*

Try to emphasise early in conversation that you are a student (or have been recently).

*How are you getting on with the course so far?*

Goals for study? Long term & short term—why are they doing subject, what is their desired outcome?

Enquire about past successes in study (or anything else).

Mentor to discuss persistence—encourage effort as well as past achievement and make point that effort is a key to achievement.

#### **First-time students**

If first-time student with Open Polytechnic, discuss:

- Personal time management etc.
- Library
- Learning Centre
- OC forums
- Breaking up subject into manageable portions
- Tutor/lecturer contact.

#### **Mentor/Tutor information**

- Do you know who your lecturer is? He/she would like to hear from you (explain).
- Received materials & text, any details changes? (address, numbers, email etc)

Do you feel comfortable with the level of work required?

If yes – continue. If no – explain options: discussing course with tutor, withdrawing or looking at lower level subject.

- Do you know due date for your final assessment?
- Have you been to the course online pages (Online Campus)? Let all students know that Lecturer, Learning Centre, Library are there to help.
- Callers to let student know they will be contacting student again.

## **Appendix B. An example of a training module**

### **Training Module 1: *Whakapapa/relationship building***

Māori distance learners should never feel isolated from their institution, tutor or other students. A sense of belonging and connection with others is a strong value held by Māori and can be enhanced through relationships with tuākana (mentors). Student self confidence is improved when they feel connected, accepted and that they belong; self-confidence fosters learning competence. When students feel confident and competent in their learning, they become more efficient and effective learners. This promotes self-determination or (within kaupapa Māori context) ‘tino rangatiratanga’: the fruit of self-determination is self-confidence and academic success.

#### **Task 1 - Getting to know you!**

*(Tuākana were asked to do the following ...)*

Your first task is to go to the **iwi** forum and tell us about yourself/your whakapapa. Here are some suggestions for your posting:

- who you are
- your whakapapa – your family, relations, parents, marae, river, hapu, tribe
- what you are studying at the moment
- why are you studying
- what you do outside of study
- your interests
- your favourite inspirational proverb, saying, or verse
- who or what inspires you to study
- what does the future hold for you

This mihi should be no more than 250-300 words.