[00:00:00] Bonni Stachowiak: Today on episode number 371 of the *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast, Simon Dalley joins me to talk about peer mentoring.

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[00:00:21] Bonni: Welcome to this episode of *Teaching in Higher Ed*. I'm Bonni, and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

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Simon is a teacher and researcher within the Department of Psychology at the University of Groningen, where he also serves as chair of the education committee. Simon is passionate about the role peer mentors can play in enabling their student mentees to best navigate the academic, bureaucratic, and social challenges of university life.

His current interest in this regard is focused on exploring the ways in which peer mentors can build and maintain supportive learning communities as well as implement motivational interviewing into their mentoring practice. Simon, welcome to *Teaching in Higher Ed*.

[00:01:32] Simon Dalley: Thanks, Bonni, it's great to be here.

[00:01:34] Bonni: Let's begin by having you tell us a little bit about what is peer mentoring and what are a few of the forms that it can take?

[00:01:44] Simon: To define what a peer mentor is, a peer mentor is where a more qualified, experienced student provides guidance and support to another student. There are lots of different aspects to peer mentoring, but I'll describe the way that we see the peer mentor at the University of Groningen and how they provide guidance and support.

First of all, they provide guidance and support in the academic development. They engage with students in terms of teaching. They lead practical classes in support of a lecture. In addition to that content, they also provide and support such students in adopting study strategies. They also provide emotional and social support to

students. As you can imagine, I'll return to this later in our conversation like when a student arrives at the university, in particular, first-year students, it's a difficult transition, they feel overwhelmed. The peer mentor is someone who's contactable for them via WhatsApp, in the classroom, et cetera, who can give them knowledge about how to deal with landlords, who to go and see for particular issues that they have.

Then they also provide bureaucratic support in terms of navigating the bureaucracy of a large university. This is about communicating to students the hidden curriculum, where to go if there's a problem, what to do, et cetera. Our students provide guidance and support across those domains, but they're also influential in terms of being a role model. They're the embodiment of a successful student. We always tell our students that they're always on stage and that students are always looking at how they behave and they lead by example.

The point is that students see how our students behave, and hopefully, it's professional and they'll adopt those professional behaviors. That's what a peer mentoring is. That's how we conceptualize it at the University of Groningen.

[00:04:05] Bonni: Could you describe a little bit, Simon, the philosophy that underpins your use of peer mentoring in your curriculum?

[00:04:13] Simon: The philosophy is ultimately about connection. Having taught for several years, I'm a man of a certain age. and when I'm trying to connect with students, it's very difficult because I'm older, there's an authority position. Students, they may not fully open up, and so the teaching environment for them it's less safe. My underlying philosophy is to what is an essential prerequisite for effective teaching is a safe social environment where the student feels authentically accepted and they feel safe, and because of my position, it's difficult to do that.

The advantage of the peer mentor is they're on a similar level in terms of, they call it cognitive congruence. They have the same knowledge, they have the same language. Because of that, they're more able to see the challenges and difficulties that students may face, more sensitive to it than I am. They may be able to communicate and express it in a more understandable language than I would be able to. That facilitates a sense of trust between the students. As a consequence, students can more easily self-disclose, and therefore are more able to be helped by the peer mentor.

Another important factor is, they call it social congruence in the sense that peer mentors are on the same social level. This relates to the authority position. It's less hierarchical. Again, that contributes to a sense of safety for the students where they can share ideas and they're willing to take, actually, intellectual risks.

[00:06:06] Bonni: This is something for me, Simon, that has been really important to be cognizant of because I like to think of myself -- A couple of months ago, I just had my 50th birthday but in my head-- I don't mean to make this necessarily about an age thing, but I think that I perceive myself as fitting in better than I actually do. Again, it's not just age. It is sometimes just the vocabulary like you mentioned, having a more expansive vocabulary than some of the students.

I try to keep my language simple, but I'm not always successful at doing that although [laughs] it depends which context I'm in. In a classroom with 18 to 22-year-

olds, it's often that I might use a word that would be not understood. I think we should be doing and I get the sense from what you said, we should be doing what we can to reduce some of that power differential. You'll hear about do we always have to stand at the front, behind a lecture thing with our notes, and there literally is the physical distance there or we could we--?

I've heard from many faculty who will sit down and we're in more of a circle thing. If that's not available, then they might sit in the back of the classroom and invite others to share. There are ways that I think we should continue to strive to make more of that safe space while at the same time going I am always going to be if not older than them, then I'm always going to be-- There will be this power differential because of the dynamic.

Some people's picture that they have of a teacher, some cultures when they come into the space. As much as I try, there are things I can't do that peer mentors can do. Thank you so much for sharing that.

Would you talk a little bit about, what are some of the common challenges that you see then students having as they come into the university? You did talk about the hidden curriculum. I know that's a big one. What are some of the other ones? Then how do you see the peer mentors able to support them in these unique ways as they go through these kinds of challenges?

[00:08:14] Simon: As you know, the particular challenge that stands out is that the first-year students arrive at university and, I believe, they're completely overwhelmed. Firstly, it may be a new city. In actual fact, it may be a new country. We have a lot of international students here and we run a lot of English programs. They may come from a previous educational environment where the source of motivation was the teacher and the parents. Then they come to this environment where it's very much independent learning. They've got to learn a new way of learning. They've got to adapt to the university culture. They've got to perhaps make new friends. They may be homesick, et cetera.

These are the challenges of that transition. I believe the peer mentor is more able to help than I would be. What's the reason for that? I think one term underpins everything, that is similarity. They're cognitively similar, they're socially similar, and they've been through it. They're able to express solutions in a language that student understands, the first-year student, and they've lived it. They've done it. They've been successful for it.

We always tell the peer mentors to always promote a sense of similarity with the student, some psychological similarity. Tell narratives and stories about how they struggled. I like to term it so they tell a heroic narrative, how they struggled, overcame it, and succeeded. Therefore, the students will see them as achievable role models. If they did it, I can do it.

[00:10:06] Bonni: What ways do you go about training the peer mentors? You've already talked to actually a number of times, you said, we want them to understand what their role is and how important their modeling is, but I know that you've got a whole curriculum just to get them trained and up to speed.

[00:10:24] Simon: We have a formal training program, students write a motivation letter. We have an interview and look at the grades and there's a careful selection procedure. They go through training in terms of to say what a peer mentor is and what a peer mentor does. We emphasize that the peer mentor isn't just working on an individual level. Each peer mentor will have a small learning community. They just not only focus on the individual relationship with each student, they also focus on creating a learning community, building connections between the students that they mentor.

They have courses on group dynamics, the lab lessons on self-regulated learning because they've got to teach students independent learning. This is essential for their success at our university. Be able to work independently and efficiently on their own or with others. We're talking about motivation focus on diversity issues, intercultural competence, et cetera. It's a pretty thorough training program for our peer mentors.

[00:11:45] Bonni: Would you talk a little bit more, Simon, about what you see as some of the key elements that are locked inside of this hidden curriculum unless we make it more transparent. What are some of the things that you find you have to help them unlock for newer students?

[00:12:04] Simon: The hidden curriculum concern was if they've got landlord problems, who to go for help at the university, where to get official support if they got particular problems, where the student advisors are, if they're suffering from particular problems who to contact, psychologist, et cetera. It's just acting as a bridge to formal advice for particular problems that students may be facing. Also, another part of that is telling students how to study. I've called it self-regulated learning, but it's always a surprise to me that students have very little knowledge about studying independently. Teaching them study strategies, teaching them to get into study groups and make a study diary, how to make effective goal setting.

[00:13:03] Bonni: Some of the things that you're describing, and at the risk of potentially alienated much of the listening audience right now, you say students don't know how to study. In my experience, neither do faculty because we think of it as, when I was at university, it was always pull out the textbook and highlight and review my highlights. Of course, we've learned that, actually, I would have been better off to get some more sleep than to review notes because it's such a passive form of learning.

We really have discovered a lot about how learning happens. I feel like [chuckles] students don't know, also faculty don't know. Sometimes if you have this formal program that can really help bridge that gap between where most people in their doctoral programs don't take classes on how to teach. They take classes and produce research on their own bodies of disciplinary knowledge, but this is really where there can be a really big gap in much of higher education and this is just one way of bridging that gap.

You also talked a little bit about the different forms. Many universities, I would even say probably all of them, have some tutoring. Then many of them have discovered that the tutoring doesn't go far enough, what that is called, at least in the STEM

fields here in the United States is called supplemental instruction, often abbreviated SI. We have an SI program that sounds like it is somewhat similar to your peer mentoring when it's that disciplinary knowledge. If a class is particularly challenging for students to learn, or perhaps the faculty member might be challenged in their own teaching capabilities, then you have these peer mentors.

Again, actually, maybe we do call them peer mentors, if anyone's listening from my university, I may have just said that incorrectly. We have these students who both attend the lecture, but then also are able to make that lecture come a little bit more alive through active learning and group learning, peer learning, that kind of thing, but that's really within the domain of the discipline.

Then it sounds like you also have these things, more student success-oriented things. You are really, you're bridging across a lot of different areas. How is that structured then? Is that all under one auspice or is it happens in a lot of different places? I think you're a much larger institution than the one that I teach at.

[00:15:39] Simon: We call them learning communities. In the first year, for example, the first semester, which is eight weeks, those students stay in that learning community for the whole year. In the first part of the semester, the course is structured towards developing knowledge of research methods in psychology. There are also are other sessions in the same learning, the same 10 to 12 people. They'll also get together led by a peer mentor to focus on the development of general academic skills, referencing, scientific writing, critical thinking, et cetera.

As I said earlier, the point is, we focus on the peer mentor, the peer mentor is working on two levels, be it to support the individual, but also to really manage and establish and sustain a learning community throughout the year because it isn't just the peer mentor that we want to support the student, we want the students to support each other.

[00:16:42] Bonni: How does it work as far as the peer mentors are? I know you mentioned they get selected. What does it mean to have been selected? Am I

going to receive remuneration of some kind or is it part of a class? How is that part structured?

[00:16:58] Simon: There is some monetary reward once we go over certain sets of hours, what they do get, they get credits for being a peer mentor. Obviously, they get a nice certificate at the end of the year.

[00:17:11] Bonni: Of course, they'd have to. [chuckles] That is, I suspect, what a learning opportunity. How much more do we learn when we're able to see what these things look like in the very messy world of interacting with other human beings and trying to foster this environment?

[00:17:27] Simon: Absolutely. I think I've talked to that, there are benefits to the students who receive the mentoring from the peer mentor, but also benefits to the peer mentor. Teaching is to learn twice. Many times at the end of the time as a peer mentor, they come and talk to me and say, wow, I really know about academic skills and research methods. Everyone benefits with that, peer mentors, and the students.

[00:17:58] Bonni: You talked a little bit, as you corresponded with me, about one way that you're starting to adapt your curriculum. That was through something called motivational interviewing. What can you tell us about why you saw a need for that to be brought into the curriculum and what you're thinking about doing moving forward?

[00:18:18] Simon: What comes from the feedback every year from the students who are a part of peer mentor classes is that they do actually appreciate the peer mentors. They do see a warm safe environment. I think we don't take advantage of that safe learning environment in terms of motivating students. We give them information, but we're not using techniques to actually energize them to adopt these particular strategies.

I used to be a motivational interviewer in the area of exercise psychology and motivational interviewing is a helping conversation that focuses on how and why people can change, become motivated to change their unhealthy lifestyle. I think

in this way, we can use peer mentors because of their unique position that may be more in a better position to influence and energize students more than I would be able to because the students will feel more open and more receptive to the messages. What we hope to do is teach this technique called motivational interviewing to students to peer mentors on a very basic level.

[00:19:41] Bonni: I would imagine that there may be some challenges in trying to have people recognize the difference between the profession of providing therapeutic services to people and me coming alongside you as a peer mentor. Helping them understand the difference between those two things. That's something that comes up, of course, with faculty. Some would be completely, oh, I am so completely uncomfortable with any of this. I'm going to keep this big wall, and then some that maybe don't always recognize to self-identify, boy, this person really needs help. That goes beyond me. How do you help them be able to make those distinctions?

[00:20:20] Simon: I think what we're going to do is communicate clearly that motivational interview, originally, clinical base is it used across a whole set of domains and we'll communicate how we're going to do that. Obviously, if students feel threatened or don't want to be involved and they've got the right to withdraw from this technique. It's also used in schools in terms of just a conversation, it's just basically listening and evoking what's called change talk from students.

In my experience, students struggle at first to adopt this independent learning. All the motivational interviewing will focus on is building that while drawing out the confidence and motivation to change, focusing on how important studying should be, conversations about making it more important, conversation, building confidence for them to be able to become a self-regulated learner.

[00:21:37] Bonni: I have not talked about this very much, if at all, on the podcast, but many, many decades ago, before I was in higher education, I used to work in the franchise industry and it was a really fascinating job. Talk about learning a lot. My degree was not in business, but now I teach in business. People are often surprised by that. [chuckles] You would probably appreciate that I got more out of

psychology, I think, in terms of being able to be effective in business than I might have [chuckles] if I had majored in business back in the day, but at any rate, part of my job, and it's embarrassing to admit this, was to teach sales skills.

It's like [chuckles] telling someone you worked for the cigarette industry or something, but your motivational, you sent over an article, which I'll post in the show notes, reminds me a lot of that because I would meet a lot of people who had learned throughout their profession, basically, to manipulate other people and to have very transactional kinds of relationships and trick people, they call them closing skills.

Wouldn't begets people, you've probably heard these things, get them to say yes three times and then you've got them. [chuckles] These are horrendous approaches. Why would you want to live that way? To help them think of their role as a helping role, these people have challenges. Then I actually have things. It was a computer training company. I have things that could help them or help their employees if they had these skills, if they were able to use Microsoft Excel better, I'm completely oversimplifying it.

A lot of times people would jump straight to the fix. What are your challenges? Oh, would you like 3,700 Microsoft Excel or would you like our club membership? You can come anytime you want and take these classes and we'd have to slow them down. That's not what a consultative or in this case, a peer mentoring relationship looks like. The article you sent, it's not just what are the challenges, but how are they affecting you? We slow ourselves down and we start to realize, oh gosh, me staying up too late, not getting enough sleep.

How that's affecting me is that I keep sleeping in. I can't even get up for my classes and helping people be able to walk through and see the impact of how their current state is. Then we might be ready once we really go, oh, this is just not working for me, to see what that next step might look like. I really liked the approach and I'm laughing and hoping that maybe the podcast editor might see fit to delete [laughs] this part of my life that I try to keep heading in a deep, deep, dark closet.

[00:24:10] Simon: I think you make a lot of sense there, Bonni. Central to motivational interviewing is this evoking. You're drawing out motivation You can offer solutions, but you're trying to avoid what's called the writing reflex, telling them what to do. What you're trying to do is to get the students claim ownership, and be responsible for the positive change.

[00:24:38] Bonni: I love it. This is the time in the show where we each get to give our recommendations. The reason I'm jumping abruptly to that, Simon, is because I'm going to share two tweets. One of them perfectly lines up with what you just said. [chuckles] I heard from Ann, and I apologize, Ann, I'm not going to say your last name. I think it's Gagne perhaps, but she's shared this tweet. She says, "Oh my goodness, I laughed so hard at this tweet," and so did I, a tweet from Mark Lewis. It says, "If you've ever said, 'sorry, this slide is so busy,' I have massive news for you about who controls the content of your PowerPoint presentation."

This to me brought in my doctoral research was in something called locus of control and I do tend to be more of an internal locus of control. It's the same thing. How could we affect change in our own lives and in our own PowerPoints? A number of times you sat in a presentation where they go, oh, I'm just so sorry. This is so busy. Like, "You, the person who just said that could actually change your own PowerPoint slides and not have to apologize for them." That cracked me up.

Of course, also we know about cognitive load. When we put 3,700 things on a PowerPoint slide, it's going to be too much for the human brain [chuckles] to be able to process and provide that foundation for understanding, which could eventually lead to learning. I love that. Thank you, Ann, for pointing that one out. Then the second humorous one, I have, gosh, with all the time we've been spending on our web conferencing tools, Josh Thompson tweeted, "if you don't announce that you're going to share your screen, does it actually share?" That's very deep. I will have these in the show notes and I'm going to pass it over to you, Simon, to whatever you would like to recommend today.

[00:26:30] Simon: I recommend you the book by Nicholas Epley called *Mindwise*. I think it's a fantastic book as essential message that we're actually not very good

mind readers. We think we are. We're very confident that we know other people, we know their preferences, et cetera, but we are not good at that. We're not good at checking perspective. I think that the message in this book is that rather than assuming, rather than trying to read the mind, if you're unsure, always ask something to get more perspective.

[00:27:08] Simon: I love that. There's a researcher also speaker, her name is Bernay Brown and one of the expressions that she uses, Simon, is the story I'm telling myself right now is that's often where we can get into our messed up thinking where it's, if you just say that to, I'm experiencing this thing and a lot of times we ascribe intentions on other people or events that are happening.

We got to do that check cause you're absolutely right.[chuckles] We're so wrong so much of the time, but it really takes a lot of self-awareness, and also courage, to have those conversations and say, I noticed that you're looking at your watch. Is there somewhere you need to be? Or just to check in because, oh, no, actually I'm looking at my watch because, and then the actual story on the other side, boy, when we hear those things, transformative.

[00:28:01] Simon: I think this just in your interactions with students and also interactions with colleagues at work, ask, try, and confirm.

[00:28:12] Bonni: I was having a great exchange via text this morning with a colleague and she was talking about that. She just discovered that her students don't watch her videos if they don't have any points associated with them. She was transparently, "I'm disappointed in that." Like you were saying earlier, I didn't want to tell her how to feel. I didn't want to be writing, but I sure felt like it. [laughs] She was sharing this because I thought it's in all of us. If we say, "Hey, would you like to go for a walk tomorrow morning at 10:00?", I'm more likely to go for a walk tomorrow morning if I set a time to it and we're going to meet up together. Then if I just think, you know what? Maybe this week I'll go for a walk.

It's that same thing, I mean, my gosh, if this woman could see my podcasting queue, these are incredible podcasts that I value that I think are amazing, but I

don't have to do them by a certain date. I'm not doing as much commuting as I used to. I can't keep up. I can't even keep up with my poor husband's own podcast, which I also really love and treasure. She was taking it more personally and I felt sad for her because I thought this is not that these aren't great videos. This is not that you don't have great stories. I wish that she didn't have to ascribe it to that it was somehow a reflection on the quality of her work, but as I say this, by the way, Simon, I do this in so many ways too. It's really, we can be very susceptible to it, can't we?

[00:29:41] **Simon:** Exactly.

[00:29:42] **Bonni:** Simon, I'm so glad that we had a chance to talk a little bit today about peer mentoring and that we got to learn about this. As we close the episode, would you share a little bit, if someone just feels that this is all too big for them because if they don't work at university, they don't already have things like this setup. How could we maybe shrink this down a little bit? What would be one little foothold that we might be able to have of just one small step we could take into some of the lessons that you've learned about the power of peer mentoring?

[00:30:17] **Simon:** I always think sharing a problem is a good idea. Always talk to somebody because quite often, they'll give you a perspective. If there's no one around, I think it's where I'm getting into the writings of Kristin Neff in *Self-Compassion*. Be kind to yourself and recognize as this common humanity that sometimes it's absolutely normal to feel overwhelmed. It's not unusual. Don't be critical of yourself, accept it, and talk to somebody about it.

[00:30:54] **Bonni:** I love that. I love that. The other thing that I think of too, in terms of what lessons we might draw from peer mentoring if we're not running a program or things like that, is just, it's not all on us. How can we shift the burden to a more collective one and recognize the power of, like you said earlier, the power of listening, the power of asking questions?

Another colleague, we had an exchange a couple of days ago, just about some of the difficult conversations coming up in the classrooms and we can, I know myself, I

just struggle. I think, "Oh gosh, I'm failing, I'm failing, I'm failing." Often if I could free myself and just ask better questions and then really listen for the answers, that's where we can find ourselves where it's not about us being the hero fixing it.

The responsibility is not entirely on us. How can we make this a shared responsibility to have a community for learning? That to me is so much of it is always about asking better questions and listening more, taking the pressure off of thinking I have to have those right answers. We've had people talk about self-compassion previously on the show. I feel like maybe we need to add that to your recommendation. May I do that? Can I include that one as well in your recommendations?

[00:32:08] Simon: Absolutely, yes.

[00:32:09] Bonni: I'm not familiar with the literature and it seems like some that I should be. It seems really good stuff. Thank you so much, Simon. I really enjoyed our conversation.

[00:32:18] Simon: You're welcome, Bonni. It was a pleasure to be here and to…

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[00:32:27] Bonni: Once again, I'd like to thank Simon Dalley for joining me for today's episode of *Teaching in Higher Ed*. If you'd like to visit the show notes for today's episode there @teachinginhighered.com/371. they're also probably in your podcast player, swiping in some direction, depending on the app that you're using.

I'd also like to encourage you, if you haven't already, to subscribe to the weekly *Teaching in Higher Ed* update where these show notes will come into your inbox along with some other goodies, such as quotable words, recommendations that are in addition to the ones we share on the show, and a lot of other great resources. Head on over to teachinginhighered.com/subscribe to sign up for that. Thanks to those of you who have already subscribed. I'll see you next time.

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