Increasing diversity in peer-to-peer education: a case study of manager experiences with student paraprofessionals in learning development in the Canadian context

Jenna Olender
Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

Michael Lisetto-Smith
Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

Abstract

This autoethnographic case study examines the experience of managers with hiring student paraprofessionals into various roles within peer-to-peer education models and programmes as a method to increase the diversity in learning development services in the Canadian context. Tailoring learning development through peer-to-peer education models for diverse student groups is an important aspect of how learning development supports students in higher education. Including the knowledge and perspectives of student paraprofessionals who better reflect the diversity of the population we serve has been an important aspect of our practice. Our purpose for this case study is to better understand how our experiences with paraprofessional staff diversity, over a seven-year period (2010-2017), have influenced our practice of learning development in an institutional context focussed on creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment on campus to better support the needs of diverse learners. The knowledge that we gained through this analysis of diversity and peer learning as an approach to learning development may serve as an example of the value of autoethnography as a method to provide useful insight to professionals and leaders in the field.

Keywords: autoethnography; learning development; management; diversity; peer learning; student paraprofessionals.

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Introduction

Tailoring learning development through peer-to-peer education models for diverse student groups is an important aspect of how learning development supports students effectively in higher education (HE). While attainment rates in Canada are very high, the issues of access and retention remain key HE policy priorities in terms of equity (Kirby, 2011). Removing access and retention barriers is necessary to address systems of structural oppression that have historically excluded many socio-economic and cultural groups from HE. As Clark, Moran, Skolnik, and Trick (2009) explain, expectations have been set for institutions to increase access through federal and provincial government directives and legislation in Canada. Thus, in Ontario, we have had to increase learning development programming, such as peer-to-peer programmes, to support diverse students including Indigenous students, students with disabilities, at-risk students, new Canadians, and international students. In addition to the enhanced programming and services being developed and implemented in our practice at a Canadian university, we have found as managers of learning support services that employing more paraprofessional student staff (that is, student employees who receive training to work under the guidance of learning development professionals in supporting students) who better reflect the diversity of the student body is important for increasing the staff diversity within our department and improving the quality of learning development programmes and services. Our purpose for this autoethnographic case study is to better understand how our experiences with staff diversity, over a seven-year period (2010-2017), have influenced our perspectives on the practice of learning development in an institutional context focussed on creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment on campus that better supports the needs of diverse learners.

Autoethnography, or personal narrative research, is 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)' (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, section 1, emphasis in original). For this case study, we wanted to critically reflect on our experiences working with diverse students as a way to better understand how we may be both working to foster inclusive environments and remaining complicit in reinforcing systems of oppression within higher education. To engage in this study, we analysed our individual reflective responses to the question of how working with diverse student paraprofessionals has influenced our individual practice. For the analysis, we used a

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creative analytic practice/process (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) and engaged in the interactive interviewing (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011) of one another about our texts as a way to examine what we can learn from our experiences with staff diversity.

In this paper, we first provide a brief background of the issue of access and retention in higher education before describing the specific institutional response and context for the case study. We then include the collected reflections and analyses of each text and engage in a broader discussion of the findings of the case study.

Background: access and retention

As Finnie, Mueller, and Wismer (2015) note, in Canada, just as around the world, increasing access to higher education for those groups who remain under-represented is a matter of public policy. Because education is seen as essential to national competitiveness in a globalised knowledge economy (Finnie, Mueller, and Wismer, 2015) and as a means to promote better equity of wealth and social cohesion (DeBroucker, 2005), governments have recognised that it is necessary for institutions to remove barriers and promote access to HE. Clark and colleagues (2009) point out that, with the necessary policy supports, it will be possible to see more under-represented groups including low-income, first generation, Indigenous, and disabled students participating in higher education. And, it is important to note that low-income often intersects with these other factors. However, access alone will not address improving diversity among students; persistence is another piece of the access puzzle. Individual and social benefits of educational participation are generally experienced after completion. Lambert, Zemen, Allen, and Bussiere (2004) have found that the factors that present as barriers to access initially are also the factors that influence attrition. Therefore, it is crucial that institutions not only commit to improving access to entering a higher education programme but to removing impediments to persistence by improving resources and supports.

Person-environment interaction and ecology models of student development have long recognised the impact the institutional environment has on persistence (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn, 2009). The experiences that students have at a university or college can promote or discourage persistence, and therefore institutional efforts are essential for improved retention. The challenge is in meeting the diverse needs of varying

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student demographics, as the institutional interactions are not the same for every student. Marr, Nicoll, von Treuer, Kolar, and Palermo (2013, p. 11) comment on the Australian context and suggest that 'Institutional leaders need to take a more "student-centered" approach, one that listens to what current students say they need. . . . Leaders must also recognise the different culture that a more diverse student population encapsulates and respond appropriately'. In other words, if institutions want to retain potentially at-risk students, they may need to shift their cultures to become good fits at the institutional level for those students.

One opportunity available to higher education institutions to foster a positive campus academic and social environment is the use of peer-to-peer models in the provision of learning development support. Peer learning, as Boud (2001, p. 3) explains, comprises a variety of programmes and activities, which involve 'a two-way, reciprocal learning activity' that 'offers students the opportunity to learn from each other.' Peer learning provides supplemental learning support to formal teaching activities in the institution and differs from them in that it focuses on 'the learning process, including the emotional support that learners offer to each other' (Boud, 2001, p. 4). Thus, when students are able to work as paraprofessional peer educators, they contribute to the cultivation of a supportive and positive institutional environment for others.

Institutional response: overview of learning development at an Ontario University

Our institution is a mid-sized comprehensive university, where the total student population is in the range of 15 000 to 20 000 and the university faculty engage in significant research activities and teach in a variety of undergraduate and graduate programmes. At our institution, the learning development departments at both the City 1 and City 2 campuses have adopted an approach that emphasises working with students holistically by supporting their successful transition to HE through providing academic advising, study skills, writing, mathematics, and course content support. The units responsible for provision of learning development are Study Skills and Supplemental Instruction at the City 1 campus and Writing and Study Skills in City 2.

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From 2010-2017, the staffing complement of the City 1 service was comprised of a full-time manager, a full-time professional staff member, and approximately 20 student employees throughout the year. In City 2, the staff included a full-time manager, a .75 full-time equivalent professional staff member, and approximately 10-12 student employees. Student paraprofessionals are employed into various roles to support learning development including study skills development, writing development, and peer-led course support. We have also used a peer-to-peer approach in relation to several access and retention programmes designed to support diverse student populations including students who are academically at-risk, Indigenous, non-traditional (mature), visible minorities (who are often new Canadians or international students), and disabled students. This peer-to-peer support model creates a low-risk learning environment where student employees act as 'model learners' (International Center for Supplemental Instruction, 2011) to help promote skills development for the students with whom they work.

There are a number of access and retention programmes specific to supporting diverse student populations offered through the learning development units on each campus that utilise a peer learning model. Students, of course, may elect to participate in as many of them as benefit their individual needs. For example, the retention of students who are academically at-risk is becoming an ever more important priority for our institution and each campus has implemented programming to support this demographic: a student academic success programme targeting students who were admitted just below the minimum admission rate at the City 1 campus and a programme of individualised intensive learning support for those who have been removed from their honours programmes or who are on academic probation at the City 2 campus. Another example is how we support our Indigenous students' learning development by working in close partnership with our Indigenous student support coordinators, since we recognise that our Indigenous peoples remain one of the most disadvantaged demographics when it comes to success in higher education in Canada (R.A. Malatest and Associates, 2004; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and Statistics Canada, 2010). We employ senior Indigenous students to provide academic mentoring and learning strategies development at each campus through individual consultations and group workshops. At the City 2 campus, where there is a higher proportion of non-traditional (mature) learners (Institution Website, 2016, Table d2), we developed a transition support programme based on research into factors that support mature students' success in higher education (MacFadgen, 2007). A

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final example of another student demographic that has received targeted learning development support is our Multi-lingual Learners (MLLs) (who are either new Canadians or international students, many of whom are also visible minorities). At the City 2 campus, we provide a language support programme, which matches MLL students with peer volunteers who are fluent speakers of English in one of two streams: conversational skills practice or academic course support. The peer-to-peer model for language support is designed to benefit both members of the dyad; the volunteers receive training and develop their intercultural competency through their participation. There has been a commitment at each campus to provide tailored programming through peer education to meet the access and retention needs for diverse students, and the use of student paraprofessionals has enabled each campus to scale according to usage and demand.

Increasing diversity within

While not identified as an explicit goal of the peer-to-peer learning model in the learning development department at our institution, we have found that hiring from an increasingly diverse student body has enabled us to increase staff diversity within the department. From the outside, the demographics of the professional staff within the department during this period appear to be 100% White and in a ratio of 18% male to 82% female. Compared to both the general provincial population and the institution's student population, the department does not reflect the population it serves. It is important to note, though, that the department has no policies on affirmative action. With few exceptions, student employees are hired based on academic merit and an interview process to confirm communicative, interpersonal, and leadership skills and potential. One exception includes the hiring of Indigenous students to work within Indigenous Success programmes. Despite the absence of an official policy, our student staff hiring is an important way for us to increase our internal diversity to better reflect the population we serve, and the many qualified students who apply come from diverse backgrounds.

At both campuses, we ensure there is regular communication between the paraprofessional and professional members of the team through regular weekly team meetings or end of term programme debriefs where we are able to problem-solve and deal with emerging needs that vary from year to year with different cohorts and from different demographics. At these meetings, our student employees are able to draw our attention to

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concerns they observe or have heard about, and they are always encouraged to think creatively within their roles to recommend solutions for consideration. Through this feedback loop, we have been able to leverage the knowledge that our diverse student employees have to help us make better informed decisions about the creation of new initiatives and any adjustments that are needed to existing programming and service provision.

Reflections and analysis

Our autoethnographic case study data include the two reflective responses we each wrote in answer to the question of how working with diverse paraprofessional staff has influenced our practice supporting diverse students' learning development. We then engaged in a creative analytic process of interactive interviewing during a close reading of the texts as a way to more deeply examine and analyse the experiences to better understand them. At the conclusion of the interactive interviewing, we asked two final questions of each author: what is the message of the whole narrative and what is it that you want others in the field to learn or take away from your experience? Each reflective response is presented holistically and is followed by the joint analysis developed through the interactive interviewing process.

Manager's reflection: City 1

At the City 1 campus, increasing diversity within our student employee team has benefited both my practice as a learning developer and the way I administer support services. As an individual who self-identifies as a first-generation Canadian descendant of European-colonialists who is a cisgender gay man, I have come to recognise that I come mostly from a privileged background that has enabled me to receive an education and experience the workforce with few barriers. The barriers I have personally faced have usually been social and legal through my identification as a gay man.

For most of my life, I was surrounded by individuals of European descent – mostly White Anglo-Canadians. When I was employed as a learning strategist, my education in this field started with reading handouts of basic study skills tips and tricks that I then prescribed to students in a way that acknowledged neither their current skill sets nor their individual

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circumstances. I began to interact more with students of non-European descent, different religions, students with disabilities, Indigenous students, and students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Interactions with these various student groups have helped me to better realise and understand the uniqueness of the student experience and how one's culture, religion, and life-circumstance can deeply influence how one learns. As a result, I began to recognise that my beliefs and values around education were very strictly based in the Western context that often focussed on a particular set of learning strategies. I realised that I needed to start approaching my practice from a student-centred approach that recognised where the student was coming from to help them reach their goals.

This better understanding of diversity also resulted in me networking with other campus partners that worked with unique cohorts of students – like the Indigenous Student Centre, the Accessible Learning Centre, the office responsible for International students, and, at that time, the Access and Transition office. Networking with these campus partners led to deeper levels of discussion on how to better support these various cohorts of students in terms of their learning development which in turn led to collaborative projects, programmes, and services to provide a more comprehensive support strategy.

From an administrative perspective, where possible, I use institutional data as a self-check to see if my student employees reflect the campus populations that they serve, and I consider the diversity of my student employee workforce when considering equally qualified candidates. Though there has been a lot of research indicating the value of peer-to-peer education (see for example Arco-Tirado, Fernández-Martín, and Fernández-Balboa, 2011; Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky, and Cowley, 2014; Latino and Unite, 2012), more work needs to be done to determine the effect of diversity on this learning model. Regardless of the argument that having a diverse student workforce is beneficial to student learning, there is also the argument that we are providing these students the opportunity to participate in the university community and develop skill sets to assist them in their personal and professional development. Furthermore, regardless of background, we provide our student employees with both diversity and intercultural communication training to assist them in both their work with students and with developing the skill sets to work within an ever-increasing globalising world.

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Reflection 1: Analysis

As we read through the reflection, we asked questions about what important ideas were being communicated in each paragraph and why they are significant. In the beginning of the text, we saw that the recognition of the importance of acknowledging positionality, particularly in terms of an intersectional identity (Hill Collins, 1998; McCall, 2005) as a first generation Canadian descendant of European colonialists who is a cisgender gay man and who has himself experienced social and legal barriers, is understood to be important as part of his practice in the discipline. However, this has not always been the case as the next paragraph described an experience of beginning work in the field of learning development using a traditional approach that was prescriptive and that universalised student experience and learning skills. It was the experience with diversity on campus that led to the insight or awareness of the effect of positionality on student learning and experiences. Through this experience, he became more conscious of the Western bias in the traditional approach and came to recognize the value of student-centred pedagogy.

For the manager at City 1, these realisations prompted him to expand his knowledge about demographics especially in terms of culture and led him to connect with campus partners, suggesting his valuation of others' direct and personal experience and knowledge. For a professional with a background in quantitative analysis, it is very interesting to see the recognition of the value of subjective perspectives as a source of knowledge and insight, as the tendency in quantitative study is to prefer generalisability and professed objectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). But, it was through the personal connections made with colleagues that he came to further eschew the traditional approach for support, service and programme development that universalises in favour of fostering creative partnerships that brought in other perspectives to inform such development.

Though the valuation of the subjective as a source of knowledge is apparent in the third paragraph, the fourth paragraph reveals the deeply internalized Western paradigm for evidence-based decision-making within organisations that is rooted in a neoliberal approach to managerialism in higher education (Peters and Besley, 2006). Further, his intent to diversify the workforce came from recommendations received from the now defunct Diversity and Equity Office.

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When reflecting on the meaning and significance of his statements in this paragraph, the manager came to realise that he may have been subconsciously limiting the opportunities for students and paraprofessionals because of his imposition of labels on students in his efforts to implement a practical solution to increasing staff diversity. Such stereotyping is identified as a barrier for employees in academic workplaces and causes a 'weak fit' for those who are limited to 'a niche in the academic workplace that is typified by their gender and/or minority status and promotes their image as "tokens" or "anomalies"' (Aguirre, 2000, p. 53, quoted in Evans and Chun, 2007, p.62). His attempt to follow recommendations for hiring practices may have prevented some students from being considered for other opportunities than the ones that he recognised as connected to an aspect of their identities. When reading the comment on the value of providing employment opportunities to a more diverse workforce in the text, he was struck by the obvious assumption he made that suggested that diverse students are not already able to participate in the university community and are perhaps not accessing developmental opportunities. He concludes his reflection by commenting on the training provided to paraprofessional staff, which demonstrates the recognition that diversity does not in itself equal intercultural competence, acceptance of diversity, or knowledge of diversity. The implication is that following recommendations to hire a more diverse staff does not alone achieve the creation of a welcoming, inclusive environment for employees (Evans and Chun, 2007, p. 90) or in the provision of learning development for the students whom we support.

In consideration of the two final questions posed regarding the message of the text overall and the important take-away idea of the text, the author offered the following comments:

> Even with good intent, education and a commitment to working with partners, I still ended up in a position where in the effort to do good, I may have unintentionally harmed or oppressed some students by making assumptions about needs when directing them to support programmes or job opportunities. The important take-away idea is that it is more than just dialogue that is needed – other groups need to be directly involved in decision-making. This type of deeper collaboration may have logistical challenges like timing or scheduling and it may not in and of itself prevent pitfalls such as continuing to impose approaches that reinforce Western, colonialist, ableist, sexist, and heterosexist organisational

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structures. Regardless of one's education and experiences, it is also important to recognise the limitations of this approach and not co-opt or appropriate other people's backgrounds but work to truly engage the community in the process of collaboration.

Manager's reflection: City 2

In City 2, I am one of two White women who comprise the professional staff complement. I identify as a cisgender woman of Eastern-European descent, and while I have benefited from the privileges of access to education and employment opportunity, I have also experienced the barriers that being female brings to both.

Over the decade of my work managing learning development services, I have benefited greatly from listening to my student staff team. I have employed student staff from different cultural and religious backgrounds, whose ages span decades, and who have had various accommodation needs for disabilities, and have learned from all of them. Through our staff meetings and individual interactions, their perspectives on their student learning experiences have challenged me to be more reflective on the limits of my knowledge about the needs and support of diverse learners. As they have raised questions or have brought particular issues to light, I have made it a point to regularly engage in ongoing learning to support my developing expertise and improve the effectiveness of my own work.

As my awareness and understanding has grown, my professional practice has become much more nuanced. My practice supporting students' learning skills development has shifted away from what was a confident here-is-the-answer approach to one that now confidently facilitates discussion with students. These discussions focus on empowering students to make informed choices about their own learning by presenting them with options and by recognising the value there is in difference and different ways of learning.

This improved practice of student learning support has also informed how I administer the service. A key component of my team training every year focuses on the importance of context in everything we do: the context of individual student needs when doing context-specific learning tasks. I make a point of discussing how diversity influences student needs as well as the experience of specific academic tasks for a variety of different student

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groups. The openness in which we discuss the value of recognising diversity has, I believe, created a workplace culture that encourages student staff to continue to inform the team about gaps or needs in service provision so that I can ensure that we are responsive in addressing them. I also try to model a leadership practice that is consultative, inclusive, and respectful of different points of view. I strongly believe that our best work is achieved through collaboration.

Some of the initiatives to support access and retention for diverse learners that I am most proud of have developed through this collaborative and inclusive approach. Both our transition programmes for Indigenous and non-traditional learners had students employed for the development of the curriculum and their delivery. By leveraging the strength of the knowledge and experience of the students, we were able to create meaningful, relevant, and supportive programmes for those cohorts of students. Another example is the ongoing work to enhance and expand our resources: the student staff members every year draw on their experiences and interests to identify needs and create new resources that, in better reflecting diverse ways of learning and knowing, better support skills development in meaningful ways. The anecdotal feedback I receive from students suggests that their experience of support from the service has been positive and beneficial to them.

Reflection 2: Analysis

In the description of the author's positionality, we noticed that she contextualised her position in the department in a way that suggests the gendered organisational structure of the fields of learning development in Canada in particular, which is also true of student affairs work in general (Yakaboski and Donahoo, 2011). When asked about the absence of sexual orientation in the description of her intersectional identities, she also realised that while not intentionally withheld in this particular context, it is evidence of a life-long choice since adolescence to not disclose such information because of a deeply held belief that a person's sexual orientation should not be open to scrutiny or judgment. At this juncture, we discussed at length the current culture of disclosure that demands such identification and how that expectation can be an oppressive imposition on others that sometimes forces people to out themselves before they are ready or can force them into a position in which they opt to identify in a non-truthful way, either of which may be harmful to an individual. In the context of higher education, decisions about self-disclosure can be experienced as

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very real dilemmas for faculty, staff, and students (Bettinger, Timmins, and Tisdell, 2006; Miller, 2015).

When looking at the beginning of her description of her decade of work as a manager, there were several questions raised by the close reading. For example, is the listening she mentions active or passive? The manager's choice of technique in terms of either initiating engaged, sustained interaction or waiting to be approached would certainly affect the experience of the paraprofessional staff. Further, the comment that listening has been of benefit to her can suggest that there is an imbalance in this manager-employee relationship that favours the self-interest of the manager: do the paraprofessional student staff in fact feel exploited as representatives of minority groups for the personal educational benefit of a privileged person? Research about the experiences of students of colour in North American classrooms reveals that this is a very real experience for minorities (Rodriguez, 2011). When describing the diversity of paraprofessional staff hires over the years, there was not the same indication as in the City 1 manager's reflection about the intentionality of the hiring decisions. When asked 'Was the hiring purposeful or based on targets?' we talked about how, with the exception of a position for an Indigenous peer educator, all the diversity within the paraprofessional staff complement at City 2 was happenstance based on hiring for the best qualified candidates.

It was of great interest to the City 1 manager that diversity in terms of age was noted, and he asked about the significance of age diversity in learning development practice. Like other paraprofessional hires, it occurred by chance depending on the applicant pool and the selection of best qualified candidates, though due to the greater proportion of mature learners at the City 2 campus, it is likely that proportionally more mature learners apply for the positions. Having experience as a mature learner herself may have also informed the manager's recognition of the particular needs of that demographic (see van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge, and Fritz, 2016), and so there probably is an awareness that the inclusion of mature learners as paraprofessionals could be beneficial to overall paraprofessional staff development as students learn from one another when sharing experiences on shift and at team meetings. In their review of literature, Terrion and Leonard (2007) noted that both supportiveness and empathy have been identified as key characteristics of peer mentors in terms of the provision of psychosocial support for students.

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The City 2 manager also arrived at the realisation through interactions with others that a traditional one-size-fits-all approach to learning development may not be meeting the needs of many students, and so she also takes it upon herself to learn more about the experiences of diverse learners. With her background in academic scholarship, her approach to becoming more knowledgeable generally begins by reading the research literature. The focus of this ongoing learning is initially expressed in terms of an intrinsic motivation for self-improvement and not as an external focus on broader service development.

There is a separation between her practice of the profession in terms of working with students, and in administration of the service. Interestingly, the impact of her growing expertise is considered first in terms of the effect on direct student support. Like the City 1 manager, she expresses a move away from a prescriptive approach. Her practice evolves toward an approach focussed on the empowerment of students (Freire 1970/1993; Kreisberg, 1992) and the valuation of difference from a number of perspectives (informed by genre theory, academic literacies, learning theories, universal design, and critical and poststructural theories). It is this direct experience supporting students' learning development that then informs the administrative, managerial aspect of her work. Conversations about the importance of context and diversity on student experiences and learning have become a key part of paraprofessional staff training. Her efforts at establishing a collaborative and inclusive work culture are described as being perceived as necessary for the continuing improvement of service delivery, though in this reflection, the primary partners are the paraprofessional team members rather than the interdepartmental colleagues of the City 1 manager.

In highlighting some of the specific programming to support the access and retention of diverse learners, she too describes an approach to paraprofessional student involvement that may have unintentionally pigeon-holed students or have been experienced as exploitative. While paraprofessional involvement was sought because student participation is essential in delivering peer learning support models, the question can be asked whether there is a risk of stereotyping a demographic based on the experience of an individual student. Though through the interactive interviewing, the City 2 manager did discuss how most service and programme development is done as team or co-authored projects. She suggested that such a collaborative approach may in fact mitigate that concern, even

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though she acknowledged that such a concern had not informed the choice for a collaborative approach.

At the end of the close reading and interactive interviewing, the manager was asked the two final questions about the overall message of the text and what she thinks is the important take-away message. Her response was:

> The recognition of diversity prompted a shift from a universal or generic approach to learning development to one that is informed by an awareness of individual and situational contexts as foundational for tailoring support. But in thinking carefully about the experience I described, I also recognise that we need to be careful about not setting up exploitative work cultures that impose on student paraprofessional staff. The responsibility rests with us as managers or leaders to put effort into meaningful engagement that results in a positive work experience for diverse students and a positive experience with learning development for the students with whom we work.

Discussion

The analysis revealed some commonalities in the two managers' reflections. First, it was the experience with diversity that prompted both managers to question the validity of prescriptive, universalising approaches to learning development. This suggests that increasing diversity does have a noticeable effect on how people reflect on their own practices and can spark the desire to learn. Second, the language and structure of statements in both reflections also revealed that the managers were not cognizant at the time of writing of their underlying assumptions regarding their interactions with diverse students and paraprofessional staff. This lack of awareness suggests that they may have been unknowingly complicit in reinforcing problematic structures or systems of oppression (see Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). The institutional culture and rhetoric surrounding the valuation of diversity informed decision-making about the hiring and engagement of paraprofessional staff that, while implemented with good intentions, may have been more damaging to students than we realised.

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We also considered a key difference that our reflections revealed: while we shared the experience of seeking to improve our knowledge and understanding of diverse students, our approaches to becoming more knowledgeable were very different. Where one of us chose to engage with other campus partners to form connections and invite collaboration, the other preferred to review the research literature as a way to engage in personal reflection and generate new ideas to inform professional practice. It occurred to us that there is great value in adopting an approach that includes both. Reading alone risks appropriation; consulting alone risks exploitation. It should be our responsibility to educate ourselves and not demand that others shoulder that responsibility by undertaking a pedagogy of the privileged (Pease, 2010) or a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler and Zembylas, 2003). But we need to recognise the limits of that knowledge and invite the participation of diverse collaborators to work with us in a relationship of '"consensual allyship," which requires ongoing dialogue and relationship-building' (Danforth, 2011, quoted in Hunt and Holmes, 2015, p. 167), to constructively implement changes. An approach of informed inquiry may best set up the possibility for meaningful engagement with diverse communities.

Lastly, we wanted to note the value that engaging in this critical analytic process had for each of us. By simply reflecting on our experiences with diverse paraprofessional staff in the delivery of learning development programming, we painted very rosy pictures for ourselves. However, when we employed interactive interviewing as a creative analytic process to engage in an autoethnographic case study, we were able to achieve much deeper and richer insight into our work that led us to consider how we still have much to learn about how to do better. It is humbling to be reminded that professional development is an ongoing process with no end. Undertaking this work retaught us the very important lesson that, as managers, we need to check our egos and be open to critically engaging in reflective practice.

Limitations and next steps

There are several limitations of the method employed in this case study analysis. Personal narrative research or autoethnography is by nature focussed on the local, the particular, and the contextual. The analytic approach is highly subjective and deals with data that is anecdotal. For these reasons, the findings are not generalisable, though generalisability

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as a postpositivist expectation for research design is not a goal of this type of research (Denzin, 2014). The purpose of the research was to better understand our own experiences. While we can attest to the effects that increased diversity has had on our own practice in learning development and as managers making operational decisions about service provision, we recognise that important next steps are to examine what kind of impact our efforts to improve diversity within our paraprofessional staff complements are having both on them and on student experiences with our diversity-informed programming. The next step is to design and implement a research ethics board approved research project to survey our employees, campus partners, and students to gather this information for analysis. Understanding how improving the diversity of our departments by employing paraprofessional staff may or may not be achieving intended outcomes is necessary in order for us to complete the picture of the benefits and challenges of increased diversity within learning development in our institution in a Canadian context.

Conclusion

In our experience, peer learning models have played an important role in supporting access, transition, and retention for students, as well as in diversifying the staff complement in learning development. This greater diversity has also served to inform the design and enhancement of our programmes and services, with the aim of further improving these necessary supports for under-represented students. However, it is crucial to be aware that some of the ways that we may as managers engage with our diverse students and paraprofessional staff could be highly problematic and in fact work counter to our intentions. It is our responsibility to be mindful that we are not reinforcing exploitative practices that may be limiting opportunities for students or burdening them with serving our needs. When we acknowledge the importance of valuing diversity and undertake the responsibility for our own education, we can better prepare ourselves to work with diverse communities in respectful and meaningful ways. Part of our own education rests in recognizing our limitations, and engaging in periodic autoethnographic analysis of our experiences may prove to be a valuable tool for improved practice in learning development.

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Author details

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Jenna Olender and Michael Lisetto-Smith were managers in learning development at Wilfrid Laurier University when writing this paper. Jenna continues in her managerial role at Laurier and is also a doctoral candidate in Higher Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her research interest centres on student learning experiences. Michael was the inaugural president of the Learning Specialists Association of Canada. Since writing this paper, he has moved further into administration and now serves as the Senior Administrative Officer with the Lazaridis School of Business & Economics at Laurier.