

How to motivate student learning support staff to work in creative and proactive ways

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore how to establish a structure for promoting student proactiveness and independence. As a measure to ensure students' learning with substantial quality, several higher educational institutions introduced a "peer leader" system to support mutual and collaborative learning among students. However, it remains unclear which design is the most effective and efficient at cultivating proactive learners. In this study, therefore, a literature review was conducted. We discussed how students can build an attitude of autonomy as well as what university personnel should learn about establishing relationships among students in order to assist their skill development. In this study, we uncovered three important factors; (1) to prevent falling into the hole of misconception, (2) to provide just-in-time guidance to students, and (3) to commit to some extent upon necessity, in order to establish a structure for promoting proactiveness and independence of students. With reference to existing indicators including the Minimum Standards of Learning Support for Administrative Staff, we would like to propose a structure for the cultivating model, as the next step in the future.

Keywords: *Higher education, Peer support, Autonomy, Design*

INTRODUCTION

In August 2012, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) proposed a qualitative transformation of undergraduate education and the university focused on helping students develop the ability to continue learning throughout life and to think. It was noted that “students can be precisely acquire skills to think proactively and develop attitudes as lifelong learners from their own experiences superimposed.”

MEXT proposed that universities should increase study hours outside of classes, as well as introduce active learning style classes, measure learning achievements, support faculty development, introduce grade point averages (GPAs), set tough standards, and implement structured curricula.

According to a survey recently conducted by education industry companies in Japan, about 70% of students believe that the “university is a place to master subjects and should focus on students’ self-responsibility and autonomy.” On the other hand, 54.8% of students “prefer classes for which they can earn credits easily, even though we are not interested in the topic.” In addition, 83.3% of students “prefer lecture-style classes in which professors teach knowledge and technology,” and 30% of students believe that “for better student life, it is better to receive advice and guidance from university professors.” This number doubled compared to the figure in the previous survey.

Japanese students believe they are responsible about their own learning, but the number of students who are “learning proactively” about what they find interesting in class is only 15.3%. This implies that Japanese students are passive learners who wait to be taught by university educators.

Recently, many Japanese universities have introduced a peer-education system, i.e., one of “students helping students.” This is one of the learning support services provided by the university’s mostly academic divisions; students who are called “peer leaders” help other students in their learning or with other life problems in order to improve their university experience, namely, to achieve student success.

Japan and many other countries use peer-leader systems intended to help freshman students, for instance, by providing tutoring, academic writing support, supplemental instruction, technical services, or library assistance (Tanigawa et al. 2012).

At one private university (the first author’s affiliation), the peer-leader system was introduced over 10 years ago. A large number of student staff has been involved quite actively in student life support. Support is given especially to freshman students to help them take full advantage of the learning resources that university provides.

At the same time, peer leaders are expected to develop their own skills by themselves through support activities. Peer leaders act independently to devise plans for how they will aid other students; they do not wait for instructions from the university personnel. The mission of peer leaders varies by the individual. Each peer leader has his or her own purpose, target, and support content. However, they share the common goal in both regular curriculum classes and out-of-class learning to foster students’ proactive attitudes, enhance their learning and growth, and help them to acquire basic academic skills, while also encouraging a high level of motivation and assisting them in pursuing their career options. These goals require the peer leaders to help other students develop autonomy.

The problem is that students do not automatically succeed at mastering autonomy and independence through peer-leader activities. As indicated by the results of the survey described above, an increasing number of students hold passive attitudes towards learning. The role of peer leaders should be to support students’ self-learning towards cultivating independent learners, rather than merely answering their questions. Under these circumstances, peer leaders should encourage a positive attitude; moreover, they should develop skills as independent learners themselves, which will allow them to provide better learning support for other students.

It is important to determine how much intervention by university personnel is effective for students’ growth. Too much intervention will prevent the students’ growth as independent learners. On the other hand, appropriate intervention might be effective to enhance their motivation and skill development. However, it is difficult to decide when and how to facilitate learner autonomy more effectively.

Therefore, we need to investigate what university personnel can do to foster student autonomy, and develop a training program for peer leaders.

The role of university officers

How should we approach the issue of encouraging students’ positive attitudes and autonomy, in a way that will provide useful insights for university educators? The role of university personnel is a key factor to consider. Noda et al. (2012) developed “The Minimum Standards of Learning Support for Administrative [University] Staff.”

Currently, for university administrative staff in Japan, job competencies remained unclear, and staff members are not required to have a certain set of qualifications. They are not trained well, and there are no concrete guidelines for how they should support student learning. In order to improve this situation, Noda et al. referred to the guidelines for job competencies created and used in the United States to develop a minimum standard as a guide for inexperienced Student Affairs support officers.

Table 1 summarizes the minimum standards. Note that (1), (3), (4), and (8) are closely related to nurturing student autonomy. The behaviors described for university staff are expected to support the acquisition of students' proactiveness. In the example above, this seems to be the reason students' motivation decreased: University personnel did not exercise these four elements. However, if university personnel implement these four important elements, their actions may be effective at facilitating student autonomy. We need to elaborate the four elements to develop a cultivation program for peer leaders.

Table 1 The Minimum Standards of Learning Support for Administrative Staff

(1) Interpersonal communication skills	To create an atmosphere to talk. To be able to listen carefully and comprehend what students say.
(2) Response to diversity and personality	To appreciate diversity in personal experiences, cultural differences, and genders and to respond appropriately to each student.
(3) Support for self-learning	To support students to seek necessary information by themselves and set their own goals.
(4) Consultation and problem solving	To understand students' problems, provide knowledge, information, and other resources, and then offer advice and assistance.
(5) Cooperation with other university departments	To cooperate with other university departments in order to create new services or facilitate the learning environment.
(6) Assessment and evaluation	To understand what kind of learning support students need and to help them start at the appropriate level. To evaluate students' growth or learning outcomes resulting from the learning support.
(7) Counseling, care, and help	To help troubled students by providing counseling or necessary assistance. To monitor their situation continuously.
(8) High expectations for student learning	To understand the principle and mission of the university. To motivate students by holding high expectations for their learning.

Noda et al. (2012, p. 714)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper explores how to establish a structure for promoting student proactiveness and independence. We will focus on the peer-leader system as a training opportunity for cultivating student autonomy. We will view the university as a place where students are able to build upon advances already made through their learning experiences to develop themselves into independent learners.

METHODS

The method of the study is to investigate previous research reported in the literature. Previous studies have focused on how learners build the new knowledge. Study from the U.S. schools identified the difference between teaching and learning (Bransford et al. 2000). In regards to the relationship between students and university personnel, we sought an implication from the perspective of consulting (Schine 1999). We referenced to the study of Deci (1995) as for sustainability issues for independence of college students.

RESULTS

Firstly, we would like to discuss whether the promotion of mutual learning among students is the same as letting them "do their own thing." Can student autonomy be cultivated by adopting a non-interference, laissez-faire policy? We would be mistaken to assume that students create new knowledge by themselves. The U.S. Committee on Developments in Science of Learning pointed out that this idea is a "misconception."

Bransford et al. (2000) described that “a common misconception regarding ‘constructivist’ theories of knowing (that existing knowledge is used to build new knowledge) is that teachers should never tell students anything directly but, instead, should always allow them to construct knowledge for themselves. This perspective confuses a theory of pedagogy (teaching) with a theory of knowing.” They explained that this happens when educators believe all new knowledge stems from the existing knowledge held by students. They showed that teachers may confuse teaching and knowing, pointing out that “teachers still need to pay attention students’ interpretations and provide guidance when necessary.”

In nurturing student autonomy, we should be careful not to rely on this “misconception.” Then, what solution can be offered? We need to design a theory for avoiding situations of the misconception described above.

From the perspective of consulting

In this section, we explore a case example from the perspective of consulting about methodology in interpersonal relationships, i.e., how to help others find a solution. Schein (1999) emphasized the importance of consultants establishing a relationship with their clients. He claimed that consultants do not know enough about the culture of the organization to be able to make recommendations about solving the organization’s problems. He explained that when consultants propose a solution to their client, organization members might feel as though they are being controlled by external pressure, and in some cases, they might resist the plans or pressure. He also suggested that “consultants should not be burdened with worries and problems of the client.”

If we consider that the peer leader is the client and university personnel are the consultant, how should university personnel build a relationship with the peer-leader organization? How might university personnel approach the troubles of a student organization? Or, in the first place, shall we consider that this relationship is different from the relationship between the client and consultant? Below is an example of the relationship between peer leaders and a university personnel member in charge of developing the peer-education system at the Japanese private university.

The university personnel member said, “Students should solve their own problems within their organization, so I should not interfere with it.” She expected students to manage their studies autonomously for their self-development. However, the results of her work were not successful because she did not take any actions to understand the students’ current situation, including their thoughts or concerns. Communication between the two parties also remained insufficient, and this infrequent communication led to decreased student motivation. This case falls under the “misconceptions” Bransford pointed out. The university personnel member should have paid greater attention to the knowledge students already had and provided appropriate explanations or guidance as needed. Schein (1999) argued that management related to human issues is largely involved in the design plan and control process, and he maintained that those who help others should display their expertise in the design and control of the process, especially in designing a plan. Moreover, he added that it is a serious problem that managers, teachers, and consultants are not capable of designing an appropriate plan.

How to overcome “misconception”

When the university personnel member understood that she needed to design a plan in order to overcome the “misconceptions,” she started to implement changes. In order to improve communication among the students, she tried to connect with student leaders and encouraged them to come talk to her. She participated in student meetings to listen carefully to their thoughts. She asked questions such as “How would you like to develop your abilities through the peer-leader activities?” Then, she listened to the students’ ideal goals and described the current situation recognized by both parties. Then she and the students discussed what kind of knowledge is necessary for them to fill the gap. Through such dialogues, both parties can understand the issue at hand, and students are able to ask the university personnel member for assistance. The university personnel are ready to work for the students by guiding them towards various university resources. For example, university personnel are able to give students advice about library resources (e.g., books, journals, electric databases, and reference services), Internet use, and organizing study groups. Moreover, it might be possible to invite guest lecturers in connection with the resources held by university personnel in order to enhance student learning.

Consequently, in this case, two-way communication between the students and university staff was established, and that was the first step towards building a trusting relationship between the two, as the students believed “I can talk to the university personnel when I am in trouble.” From this, we learned that university personnel need to design a supportive environment before they start, and it is important to build trust relationships (i.e., rapport). Building rapport should be a basic condition from the very beginning of the efforts to develop students’ autonomy.

Intervention from university personnel

It is important to determine how much intervention by university personnel is effective for peer leaders' growth. Too much intervention will hinder their growth as independent learners. On the other hand, appropriate intervention might be effective to enhance their motivation and skill development. However, it is difficult to decide when and how we should take action to facilitate peer leaders' autonomy more effectively.

Hiring faculty who specialize in psychology or counseling might work to some extent. The peer-leader organization works well as long as the university staff takes care of the peer leaders; in other words, the university must fulfill certain commitments. Then, if the commitments end, what will happen? Can student organizations continue to function autonomously? We should design and develop a program for cultivating independent peer leaders.

Deci (1995) explained that students should be expected to achieve their own success. He further added that we have to think about how to teach students to become self-determined and engage in sustainable learning. We need to commit to helping students develop a spontaneous attitude that will enable them to succeed on their own.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we described three important factors of facilitating student proactiveness and autonomy: to prevent falling into a situation of misconception, to provide just-in-time guidance to students, and to commit, to some extent, to necessity in order to establish a structure for promoting student independence.

In principle, only students are able to solve their own problems. University staff can support them but cannot do all the work on their behalf. Thus, we need to investigate the quality and quantity of the commitment needed to develop students' autonomy effectively. With reference to existing indicators including the Minimum Standards of Learning Support for Administrative Staff, we propose a structure for the cultivating model to overcome misconceptions and to cultivate student autonomy and proactiveness, with a view to the university as a place where students develop their own knowledge and skills effectively and efficiently.

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