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StudyCircle: Promoting a Restorative Student Community

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StudyCircle: Promoting a Restorative Student Community

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to all students for reminding us that the first skill a teacher must have is humanity: the ability to recognize the other as a person. Sincere gratitude to all the students who participated in our peer mentoring project and also to Caterina Dessole and Salvatore Dore who supported them to create the StudyCircle Logo.

StudyCircle: Promoting a Restorative Student Community

Anna Bussu¹, Carmen N. Veloria², and Carolyn Boyes-Watson³

Abstract

This article presents a model of teaching and learning conceptualized as the StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication. It was a pilot program co-developed among second year communication students at the University of Sassari (Italy) in 2014-2015 with the purpose of facilitating active learning, promoting a culture of peace and well-being/life skills among students and faculty, and creating robust mechanisms for integrating marginalized students to the university community, thus potentially preventing school detachment among vulnerable student populations. Drawing on Peace Circles as a holistic methodology for promoting a restorative student community, this article presents the constructivist theoretical framework underpinning the StudyCircle Model, describes the paradigm in practice and discusses student outcomes which include active learning, conflict transformation, community building, and the development of self and collective efficacy.

Keywords: active learning, community building, teaching & learning methodologies, restorative practices, life skills, peer mentoring.

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Introduction

Universities face multiple challenges ranging from the need to engage students as active and agentic learners to developing pedagogical strategies that lead to equitable outcomes (Pena, Bensimon & Colyar, 2006). The need to address these challenges is particularly urgent for first-generation college students, students of color and other non-traditional students such as adult learners, part-time students and students with special needs, English-Language Learners (ELLs) and students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ). Research indicates that these students are actively choosing to attend universities that provide a sense of acceptance, belonging, and community (Sanlo, 2004). Therefore, there must be a recognition that all of these students bring to bear various backgrounds, unique histories, linguistic variants, political and religious affiliations, and sexual orientations (Booker, Merriweather & Campbell-Whatley, 2016; Bussu, Quinde Reyes, Macias Ochoa & Mulas, 2016).

If the goal of higher education is to prepare individuals for what Freire (1970) called a “self-managed” life, then institutions have a responsibility to help foster environments that are conducive to promoting this skill set (Hanson, Trolan, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2016). In place of passive intake of content delivered through lectures, we put forth StudyCircles (SC) as a pedagogical model (Bussu et al., 2016; Bussu, Boyes-Watson & Veloria, 2017) that encourages students’ agency, problem-solving, and collaboration. This is premised on the notion that institutions need to help students learn how to become lifelong learners able to partake in their own growth and development. In the context of institutions of higher education this includes: providing opportunities to meaningfully interact with content, promoting interpersonal conflict resolution skills, and supporting healthy relationships. University campuses confront the same institutionalized patterns of racism, sexism and discrimination prevalent within the wider society, and there is a need for opening spaces for genuine dialogue across differences in power and privilege in diverse communities. Conflicts, both interpersonal and systemic, remain as a vital and valuable opportunity for transforming relationships to more just and equitable forms. This means that universities need to consider core mission statements and be intentional about the “minds” and “habits” they cultivate among its student-body. While conceptualizing this work, we pondered: Is the social purpose of universities to prepare students for careers? Or is it to prepare students to be active and informed citizens equipped with the vision and skills needed to create new, as of yet unimagined, social systems and organizations? What kind of citizens are we, as university faculty, shaping and socializing in our institutions? As higher education faculty teaching in both education and sociology, we argue that at this stage in human evolution, we need creators – social creators – citizens with the skills to develop new ways of communicating, collaborating, and organizing.

In the following sections, we present a pilot program, conceptualized as StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication (SCM), which integrates peer-mentoring, restorative practices, and a teacher- as- coach model, to promote academic community building and support the development of life skills. We do this by first exploring the constructivist theoretical underpinnings of the SCM which expands on the Life Skills Model proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1999) and make linkages to the relevant five skills: (1) decision-making and problem-solving; (2) creative thinking and critical thinking; (3) communication and interpersonal skills; (4) self-awareness and empathy; and (5) coping with emotions. Secondly, we turn to a specific context to illustrate how the SCM was implemented in an educational setting, present educational outcomes and discuss both limitations and areas that warrant further exploration.

Theoretical Underpinning of the StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication

There is a growing awareness that the period of emerging adulthood extends through the twenties and university students are still developing key social emotional, cognitive and decision-making skills (Wurdinger & Qureshi, 2015). Therefore, the teaching of life skills - those psychosocial skills required to meet the challenges of life (WHO, 1997) is necessary within higher education to help students develop both self (Bandura, 1995) and collective efficacy (Bandura, 2004). However, we were interested in exploring pedagogical approaches that would allow us to teach these in a more integrated fashion. For example, at the post-secondary level, these higher order life skills include time management, accountability, flexibility, adaptability; self-control, collaboration, responsibility and leadership. We posit that these skills can be taught by using collaborative (Bower, Lee & Dalgarno, 2017) and active pedagogies embedded in peer-mentoring (Dawson, 2014; Egege & Kutieleh, 2015) and in the restorative practices of the Peace Circle methodology, which is a carefully constructed, intentional dialogical space. This process relies upon key structural elements that organize the interaction for maximum understanding, empowerment and connection among the participants.

This is in alignment with the constructivist theory⁴ (Gray, 1997), whereby the teacher's goal is to facilitate the theoretical and practical learning with respect to essential skills and to supervise the activities implemented by students. Thus, the teacher-coach model prioritizes the learning process and growth by emphasizing individual autonomy while simultaneously attending to

⁴For the [constructivist learning theory](#) teaching is based on the belief that learning occurs as learners are actively involved in a process of meaning and knowledge construction as opposed to passively receiving information. Learners are the makers of meaning and knowledge. Constructivist teaching fosters critical thinking, and creates motivated and independent learners.

academic achievement. The teacher-coach does not provide solutions, but rather facilitates a generative process (Huston & Weaver 2007; Short et. al., 2010). This requires a positioning whereby the teacher-coach valorizes each member and helps facilitate learning by getting involved in activities, sharing responsibility for the learning process, and assessing and shifting instruction if need be. This pedagogical balancing act entails attending to the emotional needs of everyone in the group and managing conflict if/when it arises and overall being able to exert authority when needed with a high level of respect and trust.

Constructivist approaches to learning are rooted in a commitment to social interaction, scaffolding, building upon prior knowledge (Vygotsky, 1980) and the notion that instructors and students should engage in active dialog (Bruner, 1996). The StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication (SCM) (Bussu et al., 2017; 2016) draws on constructivist approaches in reconceptualizing a WHO (1997) Life Skill Model and integrating lifeskills into peer mentoring (Dawson, 2014; Egege & Kutieleh, 2015, Hall & Jaugietis, 2011), informed by the restorative practice of the Peacemaking Circle (Boyes-Watson, 2005). This process created the conditions for an intentional teacher-as-coach approach to instruction (Huston & Weaver 2007; Short, Kinman & Baker, 2010). As such, the instructor facilitates and encourages interactions that allow for different ways of being and seeing to emerge in accordance to active and transformative methods of teaching which places the student at the center of learning (Dyson 2010) and encourages reflection and inquiry (Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh 2014).

A Reconceptualized Life Skills Model

The Model of Life Skills developed by the WHO (1997; 1999) represents important life skills; however, as noted earlier, the domains of the cognitive, emotional and relational are portrayed as separate spheres untouched by one another (see figure 1).

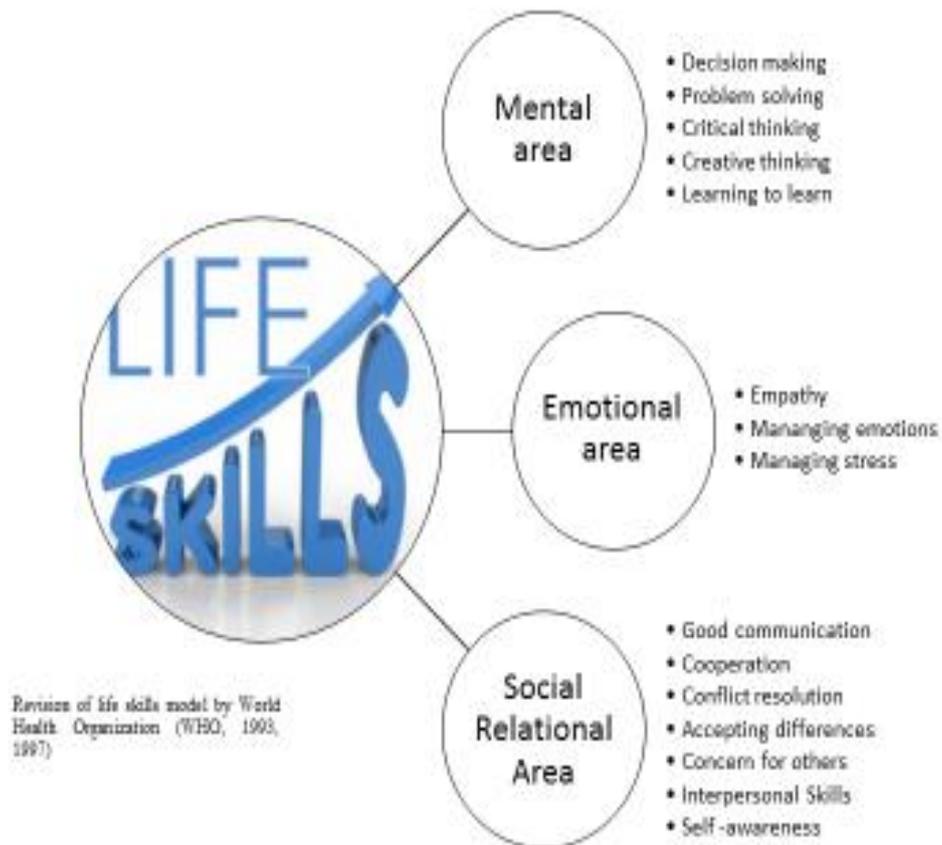


Figure 1 Life Skills Model

On the other hand, Figure 2 represents these spheres as inherently integrated with one another; always overlapping and of equal proportion in their relative importance in shaping human agency. Figure 2 recognizes that all human purposeful behavior has cognitive, emotional and relational components that are simultaneously present and inseparable from one another. Awareness of one's own emotions and the ability to empathize and understand the emotions of others is a core interpersonal skill because emotional intelligence is an integral part of human intelligence. Relational skills are of equal importance to cognitive skills because cooperation and collaboration are fundamental components of self-efficacy.

Restorative Communication Model

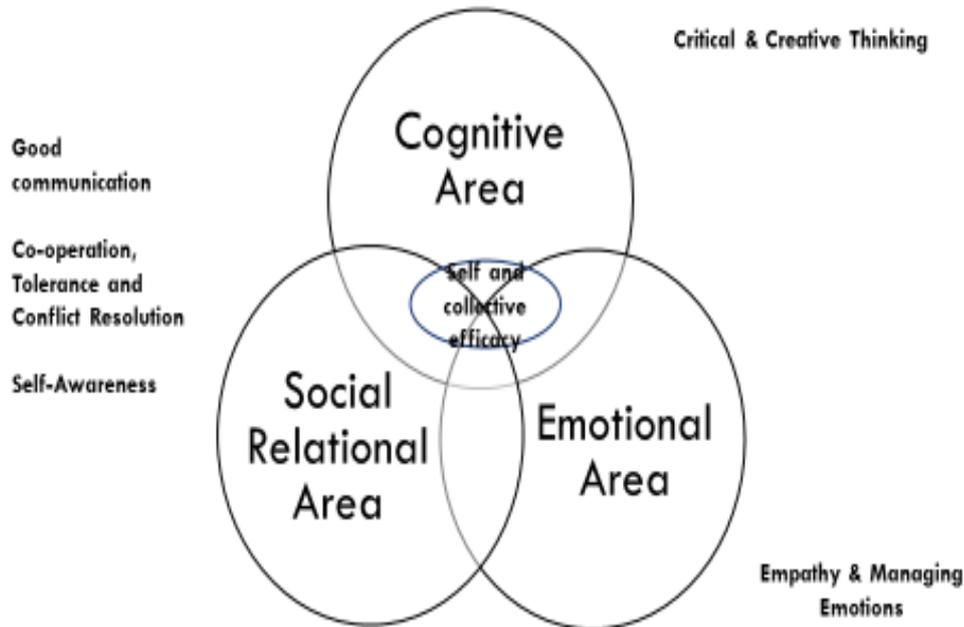


Figure 2 StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication

At the center of Figure 2 are the both concepts of self -efficacy and collective efficacy. This highlights a second key difference between the model of Life Skills presented in Figure 1 and the Model presented in Figure 2. The traditional conception of Life Skills presents the skills as an individual skill set. This is reflective of the modern conception of the individual as the fundamental unit of society apart from the group. The Western model places the individual both in isolation from the community and often in opposition to the community. Intentionally, Figure 2 is in alignment with indigenous understanding of human development.

We posit that self-efficacy arises from a sense of purpose and meaning within the context of relationships (Clarke, 2002). All behavior is motivated by affect, which is the driver of human agency. Our sense of individual purpose and meaning is constructed within the context of our connection with others within a larger group. The capacity for collective efficacy – that is, the ability of a group to define and achieve its goals despite obstacles and setbacks, reflects the quality of the relationships among its members. The higher the level of cohesion, trust, shared values and understandings among the group, the higher the collective efficacy of the group.

While the idea of self-efficacy reflects the important reality of human agency and the concomitant ideas of personal responsibility, motivation and accountability for one's behavior, Figure 2 and the StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication recognizes the individual as embedded within community. The individual is an actor with choice and responsibility in relationship to others and the qualities of the individual emerge through relationships with others within the community. The self, in this model, is at the center of the group, neither absorbed within it nor existing apart from it. The main difference between Figure 1 and 2 is that the former represents life skills as a set of skills that can be transferred and deposited from an authoritative source to receptive individuals. Figure 2 demonstrates that the developments of self-efficacy and collective efficacy are emergent qualities that arise through active democratic engagement with others. The development of these qualities emerges through practices and it is inherently experiential; this means that students exhibit a 'learn by doing' approach.

Emergence of StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication

Over the years, the lead author noticed that students struggled with self-organization, coping skills and the ability to deal with psychological issues related to anxiety; the ability to manage emotions; and the ability to develop stronger skills in managing their own time management and study skills. At the University, students are required to pass a first-year examination. This stringent requirement significantly contributes to student attrition and disengagement. The idea of StudyCircle arose from the need to address the issues. In 2014/2015, a pilot study was implemented at Sassari University located in Sardinia, Italy. As a medium size University, it is comprised of approximately 18,000 students and about 700 professors across 40 departments, academic centers and institutes. The goal of SCM was to train second year students as facilitators/trainer so that, in turn, they could support first year students as they transition to the University.

Twenty motivated second -year students (full-time and part-time) voluntarily decided to participate in the StudyCircle Project. Peer mentors were engaged with the project in exchange for five university credits relating to participation in training and the implementation of activities to support first-year undergraduates in undertaking their exams. The students were selected to be peer mentors using an aptitude motivational interview (Söderlund et al. 2011). The initial group of mentor students included 12 women and 8 men, ages ranging from 20 to 36 years-old. The group also included one paraplegic woman and one student with Asperger's Syndrome. 50 first-year students ranging in age from 19-55 participated in the pilot project. Taking an action research approach to the training component allowed for participants' comments, opinions, and reflections to surface (Lewin, 1946) and to promote

collaborative research involving students (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). These served to stimulate critical and self-reflective thinking which enabled us to collectively address problems and offer possible solutions while students participated in the training and explored topics to discuss with first-year students. This is premised on the idea that scientific knowledge and technical competence are interconnected in a mutual co-productive process (De Backer, Keer & Martin, 2015).

Phase 1 Mentors' Training	Phase 2 Implementation of mentors' activities	Phase 3 Impact Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre and post questionnaires to gauge participant's perception of "life-skills" • Training on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. strategies to promote life skills (i.e effective communication) ii. Restorative practices iii. Active methodologies and strategies to involve first year students • Teacher as a coach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of 7 subgroups comprising of 3 peer mentors • Creation of clubs/group of study and peace circles and other activities to involve second year students in students community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final questionnaires to gauge student satisfaction (peer mentors and first year undergraduates) • Semi-structured self-administered questionnaires for peer mentors and 1 tutor (n=21) and first year undergraduates (n=50) to collect Participant feedback on activities/programming; • Analysis of students' outcomes (Portfolio of participant's work)

Table 1 StudyCircle Phases

StudyCircle Model of Restorative Communication: Design, Analysis & Outcomes

Design

The goal of the StudyCircle project was to increase the academic and social integration of first year students at the University through the development of restorative life skills (Bussu et al., 2017) through a peer

mentoring relationship (Jacobi, 1991; Outhred & Chester, 2010; Memon et al., 2015). A secondary goal was to increase the cognitive and social-emotional life skills of second year peer mentors as well. The SCM focuses on the fostering restorative communication. This is central to the development of both self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995) and collective efficacy (Bandura, 2004). Restorative communication encompasses the empathetic skills needed for effective interpersonal conflict resolution, but is more far reaching. The elements of restorative communication include: (1) engagement in *generative* communication that is introspective, reflective and increases self-awareness; (2) engagement in *emotional* communication to express one's feelings effectively and appropriately verbally and nonverbally; and (3) the ability to engage in *empathetic communication* - to listen and understand others and encounter differences without making judgments (Bussu et al., 2016). We believe it represents a new wave of restorative practices beyond conflict resolution and the prevention of student misconduct towards the promotion of the key life skills and the building of inclusive and caring communities. The "StudyCircle" project (Bussu et al., 2016), focuses on four theoretical areas presented above: (1) the cultivation of restorative life skills; (2) Transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2013) (3) The role of the teacher as coach (Huston and Weaver 2007; Short, Kinman & Baker, 2010) and (4) peace circles to promote a peaceful and inclusive student culture (Pranis, 2005).

One assistant professor of Social Psychology promoted the project and trained the peer mentors. The assistant professor interpreted her role during the project as "teacher-coach" to motivate, support and train students (Huston & Weaver, 2007). One third year undergraduate student supported the lecturer and volunteered to observe and monitor the experience and group dynamics. The project team consisted of three researchers, one of whom designed the project and trained peer mentors, and two external researchers. Together they analysed and interpreted the data using content analysis (Worthington and Whittaker 2006).

Peer mentors were also trained to conduct interviews with first year students. The training content focused on: A) motivational group interviewing; B) a psychological contract in the classroom; C) sharing the educational objectives and facilitators roles; D) learning by doing: i.e. how to manage the team; active teaching methodologies for learning how to manage study groups (organizing them, what methods to adopt, how to promote the activity etc.); E) how to conduct peace circles; F) life skills in practice; G) sharing problems linked to the peer mentoring activities in supervised groups.

All pedagogical content prepared by the lecturer was shared with the peer mentor group through Moodle. Students conducted 13 Peace circles: 8 Talking circles; 1 Community-Building Circles; 2 Conflict circles; and 2 Celebration or Honoring Circles. All peer-mentoring activities were designed

and implemented by the students to align with the organizational and interpersonal training needs of first-year students. Peer mentors decided to create seven sub-groups of two to three students, corresponding to the mandatory first-year curriculum. Each sub-group promoted several activities to support learning amongst the first-year students. The training was accomplished in 25 hours in the first two months of the project.

Additionally, third-year students collected the following peer mentor data:

1. Semi-structured questionnaires self-administered by peer mentors (n=20) and first year undergraduates (n=50) on students' satisfaction and training needs. Both questionnaires focused on student satisfaction and personal development, peer mentoring strengths and weaknesses, best practice, and needed improvements;
2. Fieldwork observations and written documents. A Participants' Observation Report was written by the lecturer and third year student who acted as a tutor during the project. The report focused on the following: interactions and group dynamics during the training; activities facilitated by the peer mentors; interactions between peer mentors and first year students. The peer mentors provided a final self-report. Student outcomes were also measured during the project and for one year afterwards, including the development of new projects and ideas (Lee 2005).
3. Spontaneous feedback and comments by students through Mobile Device Applications (MDA) (Facebook and WhatsApp) for 18-months.

Analysis

The information gathered during the data collection phase was analysed according to qualitative content analysis techniques (Denzin & Lincoln; 1994; Patton, 2002). A process of validation against the above criteria was undertaken during, and after the process of analysis in co-construction with the participants and researchers (Bussu et. al, 2016). Thanks to the variety of the data collected, it was possible to make a substantial *triangulation* (Flick, 1992) which allowed crosschecking of the results obtained with different methodologies. Content validation required the use of external researchers to support coding issues and interpretation in accordance with Seale's research quality criteria (1999):

1. *Credibility* (internal validity): a public workshop was organized by peer mentors to develop a discussion among students about the academic impact of the project and on the students interpretation of the results/outcome.

2. *Transferability* (external validity): A description of the peer mentoring training and research design and procedures was provided to the participants (first year and peer mentors) and in this paper too.
3. *Dependability*: all research project phases were documented, codified, analysed and interpreted.
4. *Authenticity*: all participants could develop understanding of peer mentoring, peer mentors and mentees have developed their personal skills and knowledge of research.
5. *Confirmability*: The research team has shared the research project and procedures externally (external confirmability). The codification and data analysis were shared in the research.

Preliminary assessment suggests significant progress was achieved for both cohorts of participants in the StudyCircle Project, in the emotional and social relational areas. In the next section, we discuss project outcomes.

Outcomes

Although a primary benefit of the pilot study was to promote life skills of first-year students, it is undeniable that through the incorporation of restorative life skills, second-year student mentors gained others essential skills. They were responsible for organizing seminars, for finding ways to promote them, for keeping the group informed, for planning the sessions, and for dealing with individual/group conflict. Participant interviews revealed their satisfaction in the following areas: learning and practicing effective communication skills, discussing life skills which allowed them to recognize their own ability and competence, and exploring various important topics with their colleagues. Mentors also reported acquiring a host of new life skill competencies - cognitive, emotional and relational. These include public speaking, making decisions, overcoming their own fears, managing their own emotions and dealing with conflict. Mentors reported learning a great deal about themselves as well as an increase in their empathy for handling the emotions of others. Peer-mentors also reported gaining a sense of responsibility and a sense of purpose and motivation through helping others.

Building Community Skills

The StudyCircle process entailed collaboration, trust and the willingness to create together. A significant moment of training was when the group created a logo to capture their united vision of the StudyCircle Project. This seemed to solidify the group around a collective vision. As a result, participants reported

a sense of accomplishment and pride which was reflected in their final project. Figure 3 represents the logo which was also printed on T-shirts and posters to identify the project. The students explained that the combination of the symbol of infinity and the bicycle wheel expressed both the cyclical nature of life, ideas and emotions. This a powerful metaphor for building communities that empower and embrace the diverse multitudes that come together to make up the modern university. By learning how to “hold hands”, they become a community that is cohesive enough to collaborate, but open to incorporating new members who will add to the group rather just conform to it.



Figure 3 Logo: Group Identity & Self-representation

Digital technology also served as a vehicle to form a group identity to promote students active learning (Pachler, Cook & Bachmair, 2010). Many of the participants relied on social media such as “Facebook,” “WhatsApp” and “Moodle” (figure 4) to both communicate ideas and share information. For example, it was useful for the facilitators to use social media to inform and share content. A social profile was created on “Facebook” to communicate with all students, promote activities, events and clubs, for open social discussion forums, to share feedback and even to discuss careers. The “WhatsApp”

application was used among facilitators to share logistical information on the activities, to engage in some discussion, and to problem-solve. In addition, the “WhatsApp” was used to communicate with students, to further understand and discuss classroom issues, and to motivate the group. During the training, the “e-learning platform” was used to share the slides, form and search tools.



Figure 4 Activities Promoted by Peer Mentors

Resolving Conflict Restoratively

The life skills taught within the project included the capacity to effectively resolve conflicts that arose among the participants. Early in the training process a conflict emerged involving a male participant with autism. Although extremely bright, this student was less skillful in responding to social cues of the other students: at times, his engagement was too intense; other times he was unresponsive in his interactions with others. Students turned to the faculty to complain; students began to talk amongst themselves about “the problem” forming cliques that undermined the group itself. The mentor paired with the autistic student found it extremely challenging and she aired her frustrations which threatened to disintegrate group.

The teacher/coach suggested a restorative conflict circle in response. In the circle, peer mentors expressed their feelings and spoke directly with the student about how his behavior impacted them, something they had avoided due to feelings of discomfort. The pair of facilitators and the mentors developed agreements relating to use direct communication when problems arose. This was particularly important for the autistic student who needed this direct interaction. One of the most significant factors in the restorative resolution of this conflict was that the issue was framed in terms of the impact of the behavior of the young man. The expectation was that he could hear the concerns of others and develop his own capacity for empathetic communication. At the same time, the rest of the students used the conflict circle to renew their commitment to being empathetic in their dealings with him. The outcomes were highly positive at all levels. The young man continued with this project and grew substantially over the course of the project in his own emotional responsiveness and expressiveness. Finally, the cohesiveness of the group was profoundly reinforced by the reminder of the need for a group to respect all its members and consider the diverse needs of all its members.

This illustrates the power of the restorative skills to resolve conflicts in a manner that strengthens the efficacy of both the individual and the group. The conflict was not only managed, but it led to additional opportunities for both personal growth and community building. The student began to understand how his behavior impacted others and appreciated that he was heard. Conversely, others could share their frustrations and come up with a collective plan to help one another manage future conflict. As a peer-mentor, he commented:

"StudyCircle is not a simple project; it is a 'way of life' that permits mature and interpersonal relations. I say this because I am autistic, and I had a communication problem, but by attending this training, I learning to overcome it."

The experience of StudyCircle generated a chain reaction of more active engagement by students. All students reported that the involvement in the project created a critical group that led to increased participation in political and social life of the University beyond the project itself. As active learners and owners of the process, mentors proposed changes to the training process. They decided to produce a video about the project and continue with the promotional t-shirts. The students organized seminars to invite member of the university to come and learn about the project.

Building 21st Century Academic Skills

With respect to academics, there was positive feedback from first-year students regarding the level of assistance they received with academic content. They felt that mentors could explain the material effectively and guide them in

learning specific content and test preparation. Additionally, first-year students recognized the importance of not feeling alone and receiving support from older colleagues. This was especially important for part-time students and older students with family obligations that provided them with fewer opportunities to connect socially. The combination of academic preparation alongside community building led to less isolation and feelings of disconnection among the first-year cohort. Students reported that the experience was “fun” as well as useful. Many reported wanting to serve in the role themselves as second-year students. This is an important factor to consider given the focus on attrition.

Limitations

This pilot presents poses a few limitations. First, the faculty role was important to train and motivate peer-mentors and to implement the StudyCircle project. This project has been implemented with the same instructor in two international academic settings: Ecuador (2015/2016) and UK (2017/2018). This represents a limitation because the impact of the StudyCircle has not been explored with another teacher, who, for example may have a different communication style, or pedagogical background. Therefore, this aspect could be considered a limitation to the replicability of this project. It is, however, anticipated that the same project will be replicated with other teachers in future.

Another limitation is the current lack of data regarding the long-term impact on the peer mentors and first-year students; for example, their career progression has not been monitored. In the future, a longitudinal study could be implemented to evaluate the academic career impact on students after participation in the project. Finally, there is the overall educational context. The pilot was developed within the Italian system of higher education in one institution. In the future, we want to replicate the peer mentoring experience of StudyCircle in other university settings in Italy, Ecuador, UK and US to explore the experience and impact on students within different academic systems.

“Circle Forward” to Uncharted Territory

The application of restorative practices within K-12 education has been receiving a great deal of attention recently, given the emphasis on practices that promote active learning and lead to more expansive dialogic encounters in the classroom (Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014). In secondary education, for example, the initial focus on conflict resolution and positive discipline has expanded to the use of restorative practices for creating a positive school climate for prevention and promotion of inclusive relationships among students and adults. More recently K-12 educators are linking restorative approaches to pedagogy and to a deeper critical analysis of the educational mission and praxis itself (Butin, 2007; Bickmore, 2014). However, within post-secondary institutions, the use of restorative practices has been much less developed.

Approximately 17 American universities use some elements of restorative communication on campus, in particular to prevent and manage students conflicts (Karp, 2013). Universities are now beginning to explore how to use restorative practices preventatively to engage students in dialogues about contested social norms and to build stronger and more inclusive campus communities.

The StudyCircle Model exemplifies how education and training systems can build on Peace Circles (Figure 3) to promote engagement in students by focusing on active and transformative learning and providing an agentic space for students to influence and support one another. One factor to consider when implementing the StudyCircle Model is the role of the teacher-coach who is crucial in facilitating, motivating and training students (Huston & Weaver, 2007). They are instrumental in fostering an atmosphere of trust, exploring values, needs and identities, employing active teaching methods, and finally, in co-constructing a space for healthy dialogue. As such, they play an active role in guiding, building community and facilitating transformative learning (De Backer et.al, 2015).

There is always room for improvement and because of this project; we have begun to think of ways to build upon this work. There are many possibilities for the use of the StudyCircle. For example, this project can be expanded to work with college seniors who, by the time they reach their senior year, often find themselves with a host of other challenges to attend to, i.e. familial obligations, longer work hours, etc. A project like the StudyCircle Model can potentially prevent attrition. Universities need to think outside the box and be willing to employ methods that attend to essential skills students need beyond academics.

The reality is that understanding the competencies that students need to navigate a complex global world undergoing rapid technological and social change has led to demand for alternative pedagogies in which student engagement is key and the exploration of social contexts is crucial (Paris, 2012). The StudyCircle Model allows for this type of learning to happen, and opens the possibility of using restorative practices to influence the learning relationship and model of pedagogy within the classroom, the university, and the wider-community. Now more than ever, different, constructive approaches are needed to deal with core pedagogical and relational challenges within higher education that threaten to undermine the very reasons many faculty came to teach in the first place.

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