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### NStEP Case Study of Student Engagement Supporting student-staff partnership in Irish higher education

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## Peer Learning and Student Partnership at CCT College Dublin

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CCT College Dublin

**In this case study, the authors reflect on the development of a system of student peer support in a small college through a model of student partnership, ensuring that student agency and empowerment are central to the implementation and outcomes of the project.**

### Introduction and Context

Peer learning has been an integral focus of the teaching and learning experience at CCT College Dublin since its foundation in 2005. The CCT Student Mentoring Academy is a key institutional student engagement and success initiative in which students provide peer guidance and support in the context of challenging IT and business subjects. In recent years, in tandem with the College's membership of the National Student Engagement Programme, the operation of the CCT Student Mentoring Academy is informed by an increased emphasis on student partnership and leadership. Student mentors now inform the design and delivery of mentoring activities in partnership with faculty. Many student mentors now also occupy student representative positions on institutional committees such as the Centre for Teaching and Learning Forum, the Academic Council and the Academic Integrity Committee. One student mentor has assumed the role of Co-Chair of the Academic Integrity Committee with a member of CCT's Management Group. The CCT Student Mentor Academy has proven to be an important mechanism for promoting student partnership and leadership as well as student engagement and success.

### Peer Learning Through a Student Partnership Framework

Boud (n.d.) in a reflection entitled 'What is Peer Learning and Why is it important,' describes peer learning as "moving students beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning" and as students having:

"...the opportunity to learn from each other. It gives them considerably more practice than traditional teaching and learning methods in taking responsibility for their own learning and, more generally, learning how to learn. It is not a substitute for teaching and activities designed and conducted by staff members, but an important addition to the repertoire of teaching and learning activities that can enhance the quality of education."

In a paper entitled 'Peer Support: A Theoretical Perspective,' Mead, Hilton & Curtis (2001, p.6) describe peer support as "a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It is about understanding another situation empathically through shared experiences."

The academic literature also demonstrates the benefits of a student partnership approach in the context of teaching and learning initiatives such as the co-production of module content (Fulton et al. 2022) and in relation to students becoming "compassionate academics" themselves (Kaur et al., 2021, p.1). In a reflection by O Shea, Bennett and Delahunty, (2017) a student as partners framework is discussed in the context of the design and delivery of a peer mentoring initiative. Feedback indicated that students can be intimidated by working in partnership with staff due to underlying power dynamics. Students also highlighted the importance of well-being support in relation to the anxiety that can be experienced as they participate in partnership initiatives with faculty and as they assume leadership responsibilities with their fellow students.

An article by Seery et al, (2021) describes numerous benefits of adopting a student partnership approach to organising a peer mentoring initiative in terms of fostering good relationships between staff and students and enhancing the learning process. The study highlights that not all students were "able to grasp the new power dynamics that positioned them in a more equal relationship with staff and faculty," (p.672). The paper also states that "an unexpected finding from our analysis was the degree of emotional labour involved in peer mentoring," (p.674). Peer mentors described challenges that they experienced in relation to engaging students for example. The authors suggest that "developing and scaffolding on an ongoing basis these nascent staff-student and student-student partnerships will be crucial for their future success and sustainability," (p. 677).

## CCT Student Mentoring Academy

The CCT Student Mentoring Academy is a collaborative initiative of the college's academic faculty and Student Services Department in partnership with experienced student mentors. Peer mentors deliver sessions in partnership with faculty. In light of the aforementioned studies which highlight anxieties that students may experience as they transition into a student/faculty partnership space, peer mentor engagement with pastoral care from the Student Services Department is integral to the success of the initiative.

The Student Mentoring Academy supports a culture of peer learning across academic programmes by providing peer learning and support opportunities in relation to course content that students find particularly challenging. A Student Mentoring Academy page on Moodle is available with useful resources and information for peer mentors, incorporating a welcome video and presentation from an experienced peer mentor and member of faculty respectively. A discussion forum for those involved in the Mentoring Academy requests that mentors:

- Share mentoring experiences that might be valuable for other mentors
- Ask various questions about the dynamic of mentoring sessions / content / exercises / group work
- Share relevant information about the college / mentoring program

**Image 1: Welcome Video from a Peer Mentor (Video link available on [studentengagement.ie](https://studentengagement.ie))**



Mentoring sessions typically focus on course content pertaining to programming and mathematics as well as modules pertaining to Data Analytics such as machine learning. CCT Mentoring Academy initiatives also incorporate laboratory sessions in which software is downloaded and configured such as Java JDK, NetBeans, Packet Tracer, and Virtual Box. Additionally, the Student Mentoring Academy offers peer support to students on business programmes. Peer Mentoring sessions are offered on a regular basis throughout the semester. See timetable below for ICT subjects as an example.

**Image 2: Timetable for Mentoring sessions for ICT**

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
11 - 12pm	14:30 - 15:30	15:30 - 16:30	10:00am	11:00 - 12:00
Networking, programming and Maths	Java Programming	Databases and Programming	Data Prep and Machine Learning	Statistics, Databases and Programming
	16:00 - 17:00			
	Machine Learning			

All mentoring sessions will be held through Zoom using this link:  
<https://zoom.us/j/92279834861>

If you have any questions, please contact  
 kathleen@cct.ie or aldana@cct.ie

Student mentors flag content that learners find difficult as well as deliver mentoring sessions in partnership with faculty. In 2022, a feedback survey was administered to peer mentors in the Student Mentoring Academy. Comments by mentors describing their role included:

**“I contributed by being available for one hour per week to help students with statistics and data preparation”**

**“I helped students with both databases and programming subjects. I went through some of the basics. I also was involved in answering emails and I was very happy to see students’ progress”**

**“In the mentoring session, I was helping new students with programming and coding, and answering questions to help the teacher”**

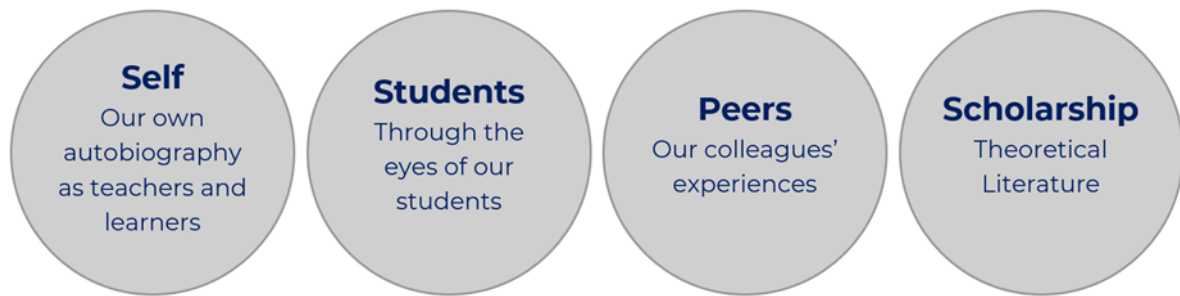
During the COVID-19 pandemic, peer mentoring sessions migrated to online delivery via Zoom. CCT College continues to offer mentoring sessions online to maximise reach and engagement.

## Reflections

In analysing the impact of the Student Mentoring Academy at CCT College, the authors employed Brookfield’s Four Lenses of Reflection Framework (1995) which reflects on the work of the Student Mentoring Academy through the lens of the self, students, peers and scholarship.

Image 3: Brookfield's Four Lenses of Reflection

(Source: <https://teaching.london.edu/exchange/becoming-a-reflective-practitioner/>)



The authors of this case study experienced many benefits by working in partnership with students in the Student Mentoring Academy including increased leadership skills and enhanced dialogue with students. The authors have also observed that peer mentors participate more actively in regular classes, displaying more confidence in answering questions and in supporting other students. The participation of mentors in laboratory sessions has been beneficial for the authors as well as learners, particularly in the context of teaching large classes.

The aforementioned feedback survey administered to peer mentors in the Student Mentoring Academy in 2022 attracted a 45% response rate. Mentors indicated that they had joined the Academy to “help others.” One mentor described how “going back to the basics also helped me..I kept studying and learning from troubleshooting issues.” Another mentor described how their communication skills were enhanced. Less positive feedback from mentors related to mentors feeling that students could “have participated more.” This feedback aligns with some of the themes outlined in the academic literature in relation to the “emotional labour” of peer mentoring. Seventy-five percent of respondents stated that they had received the necessary information and training to perform effectively as a peer mentor and that being a peer mentor enhanced their own learning as well provided skills for their career development. Most peer mentors also stated that the Student Mentoring Academy was “an important student partnership initiative.”

Mentors have also shared feedback via LinkedIn. One mentor stated:

**“Being a mentor helps others, but also helps me to stay focused on my dreams...Remember that with determination, you can achieve anything. Thanks to all my mentees for making that possible; my teachers from whom I have learnt so much and to the Student Services Department for all the support.”**

There is college wide support for the activities of the Student Mentoring Academy and its promotion of peer learning and student partnership. The College President particularly “welcomes the presence of student mentors on a number of College committees, further amplifying the student voice and strengthening student partnership.”

Alongside the successes, the CCT student Mentoring Academy has also experienced challenges, not least the need to rapidly respond to the pivot online arising from the pandemic. Attendance was varied during this time but those who did attend articulated that they found participation in the Mentoring Academy an important support during such a challenging period. The initiative has also experienced changes in staff availability resulting in reduced engagement or withdrawal from Mentoring Academy responsibilities. New and existing staff members assumed these responsibilities.

Further enhancements to the Mentoring Academy are underway. Students have been consulted in relation to additional topics of interest and mentor knowledge is being sourced and aligned to these new areas. The inclusion of College alumni going forward is also being considered.

## Conclusion

The Student Mentoring Academy has enhanced the teaching and learning process at CCT College promoting cross departmental collaboration, peer learning, enhancing dialogue between students and staff, building student confidence and strengthening student partnership. The Mentoring Academy has been informed by the efforts of a wide range of staff across the college over many years.

The CCT Strategic Plan 2021-2023, CCT Institutional Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy 2021-2024 and the CCT Student Success Strategy 2021-2023 continue to prioritise peer learning and student partnership. The Student Success Strategy as an example states that "CCT will continue to grow and expand its CCT Student Mentoring Academy...Programmes such as these will continue to prioritise working in partnership with students to optimise the learning environment" (2021, p.8).

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