

Lessons from the Past: Promoting Inclusiveness and Diversity through Peer Sharing Sessions

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INTRODUCTION

"History is not the past but a map of the past, drawn from a particular point of view, to be useful to the modern traveller."
Henry Glassie, *US Historian (1941-)*

- Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development has highlighted the imperative role of human interaction in the communal aspect of collaborative learning (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978).
- Peers are powerful socializing agents who have profound influential over behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagements (Wang et al., 2018).
- Inspired by the peer mentoring system that provides an arena for seniors and juniors to share knowledge in a mutually supportive environment (Nokkala et al., 2022), peer sharing sessions are adopted and conducted in classes, which allow seniors to share insights of their experience from past semesters, to instill optimism and motivation among juniors.

TEACHING CONCERNS

1. Students do not interact actively with peers from a different academic programme.
2. Some students are marginalized due to their different demographic and academic backgrounds.
3. Students returning to the campus in the post-pandemic era faced difficulty in re-establishing social interactions.

OBJECTIVES

1. To support students' learning through motivational peer sharing sessions conducted by seniors.
2. To cultivate an inclusive learning environment that recognizes diversity among learners from varying backgrounds.

TEACHING STRATEGY

The questions

Students are asked to submit the list of questions via Google form that they would like to ask to their seniors.

The selection

Seniors conducting the sharing session are top scorers from different demographic and academic backgrounds.

The invitation

The questions collected are shared with the selected seniors to facilitate preparation.

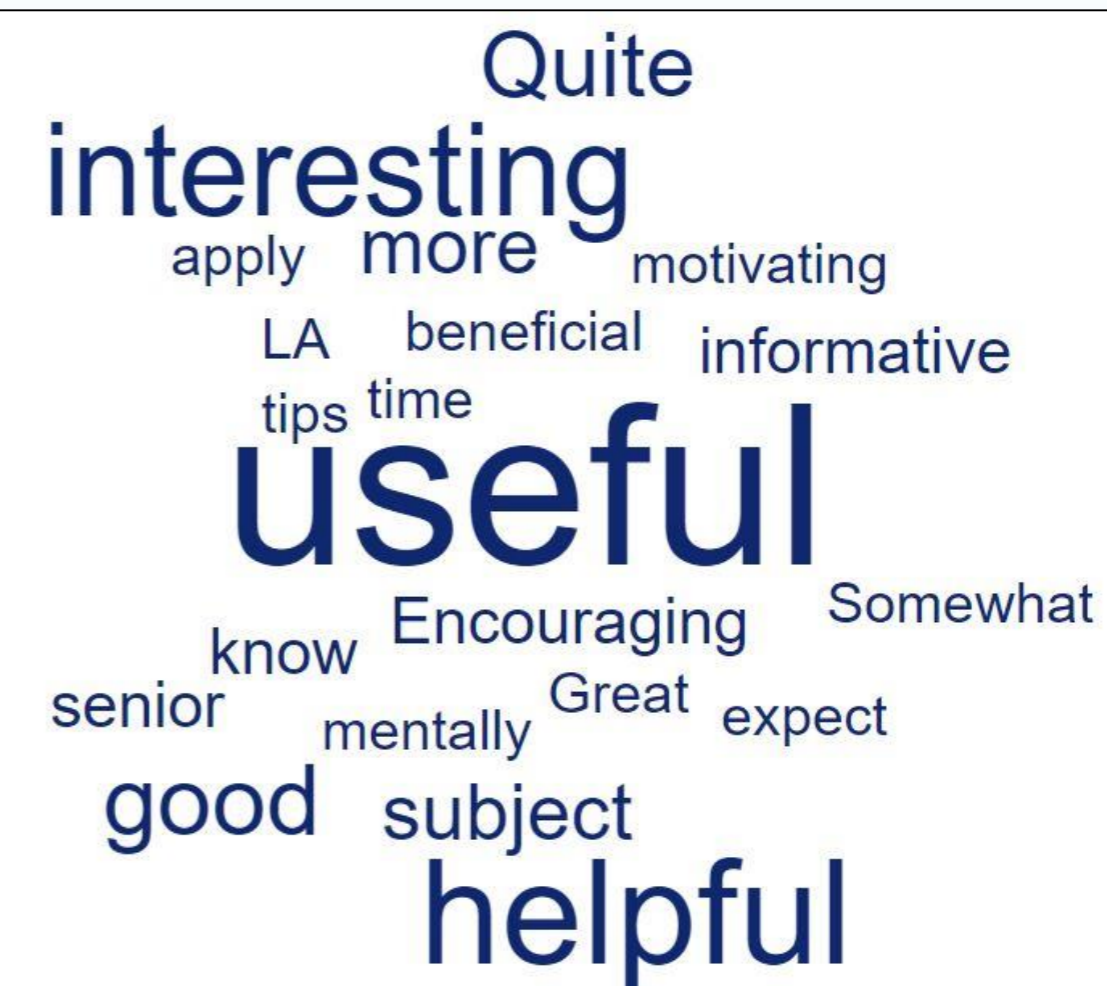
The sharing

The seniors conduct the peer sharing sessions either physically or virtually.

- **What?** I adopted this strategy in the Aug 2022 semester in:
 - (i) Subject A – A Year-1 elementary mathematics subject, which is taken by 165 students, with two groups of students with **contrasting** mathematical background
 - (ii) Subject B – A Year-3 advanced actuarial mathematics subject, which is taken by 70 students, with **mostly** students from academic programme X who took it as their **core** subject, and only **a small number** of students from academic programme Y, who took it as their elective subject.
- **What?** The questions collected and the contents of the sharing session centered around study tips, the expectation of assessments, the usefulness of the subject, and the relative difficulty of each chapters.
- **When?** The peer sharing session was conducted during Week 1 of the semester, after the subject briefing session.
- **Who?** The seven seniors invited comprised students of different nationalities and academic backgrounds (academic programmes enrolled).
- **Where?** Six seniors conducted the session physically, whereas one, who has completed his study, conducted the session virtually.
- **How?** Each sharing session lasted for approximately 5 – 10 minutes. Some seniors have prepared slides for the peer sharing sessions.
- **Why?** In addition to providing motivation and insights to juniors, such peer sharing sessions promote inclusiveness and diversity.

OBSERVABLE OUTCOMES

Both students and seniors are requested to provide their comments on the peer sharing session conducted. A total of 88 students responded and the summary of their comments are visualized in the following word cloud, followed by some selected comments:



"I found [myself] to be more confident."

"[It] gives me some encouragement to persevere."

"Very motivating and their tips for this subject are very useful."

"Kind of interesting and inspiring hope that will have this session next time."

"It gave me a heads up on which chapter to focus more on and what to expect from this subject."

Selected comments from seniors:

"Good session because I can share my experience and some learning techniques with them."

"I was able to summarize my effort and learning from this module."

"Some of the juniors I believe will be scared [by] this subject [that it] will be hard and so on, thus giving themselves anxiety before the semester began."

"I find it a good learning experience for me to speak in front of so many people."

"Meaningful and informative. Students can have a draft idea on this subject and how to prepare for it."

Instructor's observation: Students **paid good attention** listening to their seniors' sharing. Some **responded in admiration** hearing the success stories of their seniors. Students were **appreciative** of their seniors taking the time to share study tips with them, evidenced from the huge round of applause before and after the peer sharing session. Students were **made aware** that there were international students and students from other academic programmes taking the same subject.

CONCLUSION

The peer sharing sessions conducted are highly beneficial to students, by providing them insightful inputs, which further support their learning. Such sessions also promote inclusiveness and diversity by featuring students from different demographic and academic backgrounds. The social interaction element also enhances engagement between students from different cohorts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To invite students who have scored averagely to give such sharing session.
2. To invite industrial practitioners to give a sharing session on how the knowledge learned are being applied in solving real-world problems.
3. To conduct the session not only during Week 1, but also in other weeks, i.e., before assessments, to provide assurance and motivation to students.

REFERENCES

1. Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.
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3. Nokkala, T., Aarnikoivu, M., & Kiili, J. (2022). Multidisciplinary peer-mentoring groups supporting knowledge sharing in doctoral education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 66(5), 865-878.