Integrating the development of Self-Regulated Learning skills into the Student Mentor and Leadership Program

Overarching Project Intent
To create and review the effectiveness of a Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) development program delivered to an online higher education student cohort via a peer mentoring program (pilot program).

Introduction
If we accept that “Learning takes place through the active behaviour of the student: it is what he does that he learns, not what the teacher does” – Ralph W. Tyler (1949); then we need to consider that empowering students to become independent learners (that is, independently from the teaching effectiveness of the lecturer) would provide a higher basis of learning capabilities for skilled lecturers to build upon. Essentially scaffolding the learning model as well as the content.

Students are generally entering University with little or no self-directed learning and study resilience skills (known as Self-Regulated Learning). Without these skills students are dependent upon the lecturer and academic support staff to provide the learning structure as well as the content to be taught. The absence of these underlying study resilience skills leaves the students vulnerable to “giving up” and deciding to attrite when their past study approach fails to work in the Higher Education environment. With attrition being a significant and complex problem in Higher Education at CQUniversity, the development of independent Self-Regulated Learning skills in students should form part of the multi-faceted approach to addressing student retention. At present this is not the case (CQUniversity, 2014).

This proposed project seeks to design, implement and evaluate the inclusion of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) development frameworks (Error! Reference source not found.) within the existing peer mentoring program (external to the class context), in order to improve distance student study outcomes at CQUniversity.
Literature Review

One of the key ideas leading to this proposed project was that whilst there was a perceived focus on “teaching the teachers” to deliver programs that engaged students learning (Biggs, 1996), there appeared to be a gap with regards to developing those scaffolding learning skills directly within students themselves. Such skills and knowledge would have the potential to enable the students to be effective life-long learners regardless of their external academic experience. The introduction of Self-Regulated Learning skills is believed to assist in addressing this gap. (Steiner, 2016)

Existing Solutions: Are other Universities currently providing Self-Regulated Learning skills?

Whilst SRL is on the agenda each of the 8 Australian Universities\(^1\) reviewed, the focus is on imbedding elements within the coursework being delivered, rather than developing those skills independently. Whilst this approach is expected to improve the student outcomes in that specific area of study, the impact it has on overall student resilience and learning outcomes has not been measured, and is therefore most likely assumed. There is general agreeance in the literature reviewed here that SRL skills are transferable once imbedded into personal practice. By teaching the students when and how to apply the strategies as well as the actual SRL elements being applied, they are more effective at recognising and understanding when and how they can apply this framework in their other courses (Steiner, 2016). This suggests that there is a strong case for overtly teaching students about SRL, and the links to motivation (Mega, Ronconi, & De Beni, 2014) in order to build their conscious competence in this area, so they can proactively choose to apply them in multiple contexts.

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\(^1\) University Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, Deakin University, Federation University, Griffith University, Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity, Swinburne University
What these Universities do provide (external to the coursework) is information on study techniques, time management and some learning strategies. Observations by Zimmerman (1995) indicate that the overall effectiveness of this approach is low, as it relates to general activity and is not directly linked to achieving their overall learning goal (passing their coursework).

**Approaches used in the USA.**

One approach reviewed involved a separate first year multi-step SRL course with assessment incorporated into existing targeted first year courses [units] with support from the instructors in those courses (Kennesaw State University). The findings of this (on-campus) program found that “in order for first-year students to develop habits for success, they must first learn and commit to practice good metacognitive skills for studying, time management, and self-reflection. ...[the strategy project] allows for the deliberate practice of newly learned strategies in the authentic context of a course in which the student is currently enrolled, thereby increasing its personal value for students.” (Steiner, 2016).

At the University of Texas, a 14 week “Learning to Learn” adjunct program was developed, with the students again expected to implement the skills learned into their other courses (but not specifically supported by the instructors or the course design, within those other courses). In this example, Grade Point Average (GPA) and retention were a key measurement of the program’s effectiveness. The research findings identified that whilst the student cohort who did not undertake the program had a retention of approximately 55% (percentage of graduands after 5 years), the cohort with successful completion of the program had a retention level of approximately 71% graduating after 5 years. GPA was similarly improved for this cohort. (Weinstein, Husman, & Deirking, 2000)

Both of these initiatives were delivered face-to-face and with academic support. The question remains: would a similar approach delivered online via a peer support network deliver similar results?

**How does the research compare with our proposed approach?**

Most of the research reviewed has taken place in younger students, and/or within the coursework setting. Where online research has taken place it has focussed on the effectiveness of computer programs to enhance and measure learning strategies in using the internet “hypermedia” environment (Narciss, Proske, & Koerndle, 2007), rather than as a method to deliver general SRL skills development.

Geduld (2016) agreed that open distance learning students in particular need to be aware of and develop skills in SRL to enable academic achievement, but does not go on to describe how those skills can be developed. In fact much of the literature discusses or even evaluates SRL programs without providing reference as to how those programs are developed or what determines an effective SRL approach. Some exceptions to this are: Cleary and Zimmerman (2004) which refers to example assessment questions and strategies used; Wood and Bilsborow (2014) whose Ingenium creative problem solving tool has similar strategies articulated; Weinstein et al (2000) and Steiner (2016 ) which identify an 8 and 6 step systematic approach respectively; and the TEAL Centre (2012) which provides 5 steps to include within the classroom context to help develop SRL in adult learners.

Lin et al (2016) considered that the combination of Group and Peer type Mentoring within a SRL training program had significant benefits for students with low SRL skills (less so for students with pre-existing high SRL skills), within a face-to-face environment. In this case the research cohort was small, the SRL skills were imbedded in the coursework, and the need for additional research was highlighted.

Relevant gaps identified through the research:

- Is it possible to improve student retention and study outcomes through the Online teaching of SRL frameworks and skills for a University distance learning cohort?
- Is the development of SRL skills and application knowledge enhanced through the use of an Online Peer Mentoring support program?
Research Questions
The primary research question to be addressed is: **How might we empower our distance students to have a positive impact on their study outcomes** using independent Self-Regulated Learning skills development?

The sub-questions underpinning the actual design of this proposed program are:

- What SRL skills and mindset (Dweck, 2006) do we need to articulate, and how might they be demonstrated and practiced?
- What tools/strategies would be most effective generally?
- Is this best delivered through a Peer support model or individually with Peer support forums?
- How can we enable this whilst still giving them (students) control over their learning experience?

Information to be sourced through survey and focus groups

- Help seeking behaviours
- Changes in self-assessment
- Increased awareness of own behaviour – journals for progressive reflection
- Broader variety of strategies sourced, learned and applied (self-reflection)
- Increased use of goal setting and self-reflection against learning goals (rather than outcome goals).
- Impact of understanding theory on practice? (Is it enough to know about it)
- Effect or perceived effect of peer support system
- Confidence in applying strategies in coursework
- Increase in confidence in own ability to study and achieve graduand status

Program Limitations?
It is not expected that this proposed program would be a cure-all for student retention and improved student outcomes (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004) (Weinstein, Husman, & Deirking, 2000). Rather, that it form part of a plethora of support and development strategies to support our diverse online student cohort.

It is important to note that the existing Mentor program, which provides predominately management (learning environment, motivational (meme style) prompts) and basic cognitive tips (as well as where to find official support and information), still has a positive impact on the retention and success of participating students (anecdotal). The intent is to build on this success, developing life-long learning skills for both our Mentees and our Mentors in the process.

Works Cited


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2 In this paper, study outcomes include graduating from their course, improved grades or confidence in assessment results


