

BOOK REVIEW

***Student peer support initiatives in higher education: A collection of South African case studies* by X. Cupido, N. Frade, T. Govender, E. Samkange & S. Pather (Eds.) (2022). Stellenbosch, SA: African Sun Media**

Reviewed by Kasturi Behari-Leak¹

University students find themselves in innovative yet stressful times in higher education. Numerous financial, social and emotional stressors affect their mental health which in turn affects their ability to cope with their studies. While lecturers, teaching staff and management can attempt to understand and empathise, we can never really know what it means to be a student in the current higher education context, especially in South Africa where issues of equity and parity are far from being realized in the university classroom. Given our context, is it possible that alongside academic and professional staff, students themselves can learn to support each other and work in ways that promote their success?

This is the central thesis of the book, *Student Peer Support Initiatives in Higher Education: A Collection of South African Case Studies*, which advocates for contextualised, holistic and engaged student learning. Globally, similar arguments are being made by advocates for student-centred learning. One example is the ‘students as partners’ movement (Healy et al., 2014), an important intervention for partnership among students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers and students’ representative councils. The main goal is to alleviate some of the stressors that emerge through the curriculum. By creating a learning process underpinned by co-creation and co-design, students learn how to work in a supported environment while lecturers learn how to create a student-centred learning environment that is beneficial to all. Another global example is the promotion of relationship-rich education (Felten & Lambert, 2020) which drives student success through human connections and relationships which are key to students’ thriving and succeeding in higher education. According to these authors, research shows that students learn best in an environment characterised by high expectation and high support and that students have immense ability to influence the learning environment of their peers.

Closer to home, in the African context, we acknowledge that many students are first-generation students or first in the family to attend university. As such, these students do not have context-relevant cultural or material resources to access during their studies. They face many barriers as a result of parents’ university non-attendance, financial support, location of institutions in urban or rural contexts, access to data, technology

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and so on. Many students belong to single-parent households or are orphans, who play the role of parents to their siblings and others in their care. For many students, the university experience is far removed from the home, not least because universities have done little to bridge the gap between primary and secondary sites of learning, discourses, knowledge and sense of being. It is issues of alienation, marginalisation and visibility such as these that the decolonisation of higher education movement, nationally and globally, seeks to address by redressing the dominance of Western paradigms and worldviews in our curricula.

Given our context, this brilliant book, organised in three key parts, allows us to hear firsthand from academic developers about how they enable conditions for meaningful peer-to-peer support. Drawing on a collection of ten South African case studies across higher education institutions, authors provide rich examples of contextualised peer support programmes. Each case study highlights the importance of design, implementation and evaluation of existing programmes.

Underpinned by strong theoretical frameworks in the field of student learning, the first part of the book focuses on student support initiatives that provide readers with useful knowledge to explore and promote possibilities in their own contexts. This reader-friendly canvas of theoretical tools, which are accessible and engaging, segues into a philosophical and conceptual discussion of ubuntu and an ethics of care as relevant frames to enact a values-based approach to peer support programmes. Peer-to-peer academic support explored in one case study through the creative use of the notion of *Ubuntu-gogy*, a humanity-in-a-collective paradigm to re-think peer learning and support, is noteworthy. Across the collection of cases, the book demonstrates that the “system of giving and receiving help”, founded on the principles of respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement, is key to pedagogical relationships in the classroom. “I am because we are” finds deep resonance in this book to promote peer-to-peer empathy and support.

As a unique contribution to existing knowledge in this field, the authors provide a well conceptualised framework and heuristic for student peer support roles in higher education. As the book suggests, no one model of peer support can be the panacea. A holistic approach is advocated in promoting an understanding of peer support as a spectrum of interventions relative to context and students. First year university students who struggle to transition into higher education need academic and social support to find their place and sense of belonging. Who better to help them with this transition than their peers, who have walked the path, mediated the challenges and now understand best what to do to maximise the student experience. Peers also know how to work towards the attributes they need to demonstrate as graduates when they enter the world of work. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted for us all that resilience is a key graduate attribute that all students need to foster.

While theories inform the different types of peer support namely tutoring, mentoring, supplemental instruction and peer assisted learning, the reflections, data, voices of students, academic developers and university teachers are heard through each case. As one case study asserts through its ‘we dare to care’ programme, we see

how peer supported learning emanates from care. This book provides examples of high impact practices to integrate student success interventions at each step of the student journey. The book exemplifies how contextualised academic development programmes if attuned to student needs, can make a huge difference in the life cycle of students, from application to graduation. The different approaches provide a rich tapestry for those embarking on peer supported learning in their own universities and show a nuanced application of theories that speak to the needs of students at different universities in challenging contexts. The underpinning philosophical values demonstrate a commitment to transformation and advancement of students as a collective.

All the case studies in the book are a significant contribution to the field of contextualised peer-supported learning. The authors offer relevant insights and anecdotes into the experiences and perspectives from diverse university contexts and sites of practice. The editors are thoughtful and erudite in curating the cases well and linking them to useful accompanying commentary and theory. This book is necessary for anyone in academic development and faculties concerned about students being supported in meaningful ways to exercise their agency towards their own success.

References

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