Student Mentoring Identities on Film –the pleasures and risks of a collaborative non-curricular project

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In this presentation, I offer an autoethnographic account of a collaborative promotional video project initiated by a small group of Student Mentors at Victoria University (Melbourne). In this account, I also offer the perspectives of the students I collaborated with. In the last decade, student mentoring programs have gained in popularity at Australian universities and are widely acknowledged as making a contribution to student engagement and improved academic performance, as well as providing students with employment opportunities (Chahal, 2015; McCormack et al., 2010). In the context of the measured university, this ticks a number of boxes. However, drawing upon Meyer and Land’s (2005) notion of “threshold concepts” and “troublesome” areas of knowledge, I suggest that student mentoring also operates in a “liminal” space in the university, which is creative, counter-hegemonic and not always fully understood, even by those directly involved. Biesta (2014) argues that the standardization of education inhibits creativity, however student mentoring can provide unexpected learning opportunities for staff and students that are not necessarily attached to pre-ordained curriculum. The promotional video project I undertook with student mentors at Victoria University offers an example of this.

As an academic staff member of Students Supporting Student Learning (SSSL), and a documentary practitioner, my role was to mentor the student mentors. Initially I hoped that the project might involve first year students from a digital video unit. However this was not possible within the “measured university”, as although the project offered video students an opportunity to hone their filmmaking skills and collaborate with students from other disciplines, it did not fit the curriculum. Despite this setback the project gained momentum unexpectedly attracting the input of other staff and student mentors. As documentary filmmaker di Tella (2012:40) comments, mistakes can be eloquent: “the failure of a project, or the mistake of an idea crashing against reality, can express the truth of that idea or the reality of that project”. Via operating outside the standardised curriculum, the video project provided both frustration and pleasure for those involved and grew from one video to three with no pre-ordained educational outcomes. As such it challenged expectations of traditional teaching/learning and employer/employee relationships allowing Student Mentors and me to critically reflect on dominant institutional paradigms and on our own identities within the academy and beyond. The students who participated in the video project felt that the “troublesome”, frustrating nature of the project was intrinsic to its worth. Not only was there uncertainty about the end result, their own roles in making the films were also uncertain and “liquid” (Meyer & Land 2005).

References


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