

A mentoring experience among undergraduate nursing students: dialogic reflections and resonances*

Experiência de *mentoring* entre estudantes de graduação em enfermagem: reflexões e ressonâncias dialógicas (resumo: p. 15)

Experiencia de mentoring entre estudiantes de graduación en enfermería: reflexiones y resonancias dialógicas (resumen: p. 15)

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This is an experience report about the Peer Mentoring Program in Nursing of the University of Brasília. It focuses on the supportive relationships and mutual learning established between students. The students' narratives, registered in online forms administered in each edition of the Program, reveal the construction of more humanized and dialogic relationships, grounded on solidarity and constituted during the mentoring process. Students were able to experience and develop skills and values of a relational and reflective praxis, essential to the construction of a collective work that lays the foundation for the area of health and nursing. The resonances of this experience permeate unfinished and incomplete beings who, in the process of becoming increasingly aware of their own incompleteness, can move permanently in the quest for autonomy and new potentialities in their academic journey.

Keywords: Mentoring. Nursing students. Higher education. Dialog.



Introduction

Starting university is an important achievement in the life of many youths, the majority profile of university students, who must deal with new academic demands and face new challenges: they take on responsibilities, build new relationships and, sometimes, leave their parents' home definitively to share a house with other students or to live alone^{1,2}.

In this context of transition to university life, social and academic integrations are essential to strengthen the student's support network inside the university and to favor their adaptation and success in higher education³.

According to Tinto⁴, academic integration refers to the feeling of belonging to the university environment, to the context and demands inherent in it, which include students' satisfaction with the personal development that emerges with the activities they experience, their affinity with the course, and the quality of the support received from teachers.

Social integration, in turn, is the student's personal satisfaction that derives from interaction with people in the university environment and from the personal development associated with this interaction, that is, it comprises different social activities in the university environment and the student's feeling of being part of a collective in this environment³.

This integration can influence the decision of remaining in university or abandoning the course, as students who integrate since the beginning of their academic journey are more likely to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the institution, both in professional education and in their psychosocial development, when compared to students who face difficulties in the transition to university⁵.

Among the strategies adopted to aid the transition process to university, mentoring programs are one of the main interventions, applied to different contexts by different countries, to welcome and support new university students. Such programs encompass a significant process of mutual learning; in other words, it is a partnership for reciprocal learning in which an experienced and empathic person, the mentor, advises, supports and influences another person, the mentee, in his or her personal and professional development, through an interaction characterized by fellowship, trust and understanding^{6,7}.

In the Nursing course of the University of Brasília (UnB), Darcy Ribeiro campus, the evolution of the metrics on dropout rate and success rate show that the course's dropout rate has been equal to or even surpassed the success rate over the years⁸.

In light of this situation, in 2017, the Student Mentoring Program in Nursing of the University of Brasília was implemented, with the objective of fostering the undergraduate nursing students' transition to university and development of technical-scientific and relational skills, by means of integration and peer support.

Thus, viewing the Student Mentoring Program in Nursing as a space for the construction of a collaborative and reciprocal partnership in favor of students' academic integration, the present work aims to report on the experience of this Program, focusing on the supportive relationships and mutual learning established



between pairs of students. Another objective of this article is to reflect on the dialogic resonances of this experience on the professional education of future female and male nurses.

First, the article approaches the definition of mentoring applied to the university context; then, it presents the experience of the Student Mentoring Program in Nursing, the setting in which the mentoring relationships develop. Finally, it describes and reflects on these relationships, presenting their resonances.

Mentoring in the university context: Clarifying terms and concepts

Although mentoring has been presented as a phenomenon of contemporary times, it dates back to the times of ancient civilizations. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are considered the first records that reflect the essence and presuppositions of mentoring, based on the relationship constructed between Mentor, Odysseus and his son, Telemachus, the three main characters of the story⁹.

Mentor was the name of an advisor entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of Telemachus, son of king Odysseus, when the king left to fight in the Trojan War. The generational learning relationship between the wise Mentor and the young Telemachus endured for many years, a period in which he was guided and supported, developing himself in personal terms and also in terms of practical experiences. Due to this story, the term Mentor has been used, over the centuries, as synonymous with experienced guide, wise and protective advisor¹⁰.

In the context of religions, for example in Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism, there usually is the figure of the disciple who receives religious and moral guidance from gurus, monks and rabbis. However, this relationship was based on a hierarchy in which the mentor, an older person who represented wisdom, told the novice what to do, while the novice should listen to the mentor and accept and follow his advices¹¹.

In modern times, during the 1970s, in the North American and European context, institutional mentoring programs targeted at professional development started to be structured and, years later, were implemented in the area of health, mainly in nursing schools¹².

Since then, the concept of mentoring has evolved and, today, it consists of a learning and partnership alliance in which mentor and mentee reflect, learn and develop synergistically, without any hierarchic precedence determined by age, knowledge, position nor by any other factor^{9,11}.

Because it generates different interpretations, there is a certain confusion, in the literature, in relation to the multiple meanings of mentoring. Some authors have decided to use the expressions 'mentorship' and 'mentoring' even when writing works in languages other than English, and use the term 'tutorship' as synonymous with mentoring¹³.

In view of the semantic similarities between the terms 'preceptor', 'tutor' and 'mentor' in the sphere of health teaching, it is important to clarify the meaning of each of these words, especially when they are translated from different languages¹⁴.



The term preceptor is used to refer to the professional who contributes to reduce the gap between theory and practice in the sphere of the student's teaching-learning process and, thus, favors the development of technical competencies in a real clinical environment¹⁵.

The tutor, in turn, acts as a guide, that is, a facilitator in the student-centered teaching-learning process, playing an important role as an evaluator. He or she can work with one single student or with a small group of students¹⁴.

In the case of the term mentor, this designation takes guidance beyond "learning how to learn", focusing not only on the course's objectives, but also on advising the student in their search for interpersonal, psychosocial, educational and professional development, in a multifaceted relationship of reciprocity where the gain is not unilateral^{14,15}.

The main difference of the role of mentor in relation to the other two is that he or she plays neither a clinical nor an evaluator role; rather, he/she induces critical-reflective reasoning, stimulating the student to develop skills to solve personal and professional problems while striving to acquire their own knowledge and independence¹⁵.

In the specific case of peer mentoring in the university context, it is seen as a supportive relationship between peers in which supervisor and supervisee have similarities in terms of age and status: both are students¹⁶. Its goal is to support the pairs while they are dealing with emotional problems, academic difficulties and social integration – both students share opinions, personal plans, and problems of everyday life¹⁷.

The main benefits of a peer mentoring relationship are: the mentees mention the support received from peers at the beginning of academic life and acquisition of new knowledge, while the mentors refer to self-gratification and improvement in leadership, communication and management skills, not to mention reports of lower levels of anxiety and stress during students' transition to the academic and clinical environment¹⁸.

Thus, in addition to being a strategic intervention to improve transition to academic life, student mentoring is an opportunity for students, both mentors and mentees, to develop skills and competencies required in the context of professional practice, mainly skills related to organization, effective communication and relational approach, as well as feelings of trust, understanding and enthusiasm¹⁹.

Methodological considerations and description of the experience

This is a descriptive study of the experience report type. Its object is the Peer Mentoring Program in Nursing of the University of Brasília (UnB) and it focuses on the supportive relationships and mutual learning that have been established between students from its implementation until the present moment.

The report was structured from students' narratives registered in online forms administered in each edition of the Program. The forms are one of the data collection instruments of an ongoing research approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institution under CAAE 61982116.3.0000.0030.



The Peer Mentoring Program in Nursing is an extension project of continuous action, inaugurated in May 2017, whose essence is solidarity and mutual support between Nursing students of the School of Health Sciences of the University of Brasília.

The Program aims to foster the transition of nursing students to academic life by means of the sharing of experiences and knowledge about the university and the undergraduate course. Furthermore, it enables the development of skills and competencies required in the context of professional practice in nursing.

The Program is composed of students from different semesters of the Nursing course, as well as former students - nurses inserted in different areas of activity - and the teacher who coordinates the Program. The participants can act as volunteers in the function of mentees or mentors and regularly enrolled students receive extension credits every semester they participate in the Program.

The mentees are the Program's target students, that is, they want to receive support and help from another student during their academic journey and, for this, they report their needs and share experiences, successes and difficulties related to their academic and/or personal life with their mentor.

They can be first-year students - students who are starting their university life and, therefore, are experiencing a moment of transition in the academic dimension - or students who have already begun their journey in university but have just started to attend the Nursing course because they were transferred, reintegrated or participated in an exchange program, among other reasons.

In addition, the Program accepts students who, regardless of the semester they are in, want to receive support and exchange ideas with other experienced students who have been in university for a longer time about plans they want to experience or are already experiencing.

The mentors, in turn, are students who are in a moment of affirmation and have a great desire to share with other people their knowledge and the experiences they have had in university in the spheres of teaching, extension, research, and even in the personal sphere.

The mentors must have at least one year of academic experience in the course and must be willing to embrace the mentees' questions, difficulties and challenges, supporting them throughout the process and sharing information, knowledge and experiences, focusing on their usefulness to the development of the mentees.

The Student Mentoring Program is theoretically grounded on Paulo Freire's²⁰ dialogic perspectives, as it is made by and with students who present specificities of roles, without verticality and authoritarianism in the relationship, as both, mentors and mentees, are subjects in the act of exchange, who are (re)learning with each other and teaching one another by means of dialog - an encounter in which the subjects' reflection and action are exchanged, addressed to the context to be transformed and humanized - in this case, the academic and professional context.



As new students start attending the course every semester, the Program's edition is also delimited by semester, including the following activities during each period:

- recruitment of new participants;
- weekly thematic encounters about matters related to university life and/or the nursing profession;
- supervision of mentors;
- events;
- continuous peer mentoring sessions.

The recruitment activities consist of actions to attract potential participants to the Program, by means of dissemination in digital media and personal approach, both of them performed every semester. Since the Program started two years ago, 161 students participated in it: 79 as mentors and 89 as mentees. It is important to mention that, of this total, approximately 40 students participated in more than one edition of the Program, that is, they remained in it for more than one semester.

The weekly thematic encounters involve meetings to disseminate and discuss general matters related to university life, defined and presented in a schedule jointly developed by the students themselves at the beginning of the semester. Some of the approached themes are the course's curriculum, scientific initiation, academic mobility, job market, and postgraduate education.

It is important to emphasize that the students themselves organize the encounters in the School's rooms every Monday and, depending on the theme, invite nurses (approximately 10 professionals during the semester) to talk about a certain matter. The action of former students, graduate nurses, occurs exclusively in these thematic encounters, which assume the aspect of an amplified mentoring session about a specific topic, directed at all the pairs of students.

The supervision of mentors, in turn, includes monitoring, resolution of impasses, supportive actions, and provision of qualifications necessary to the exercise of the mentor function. These actions are performed by the teacher who coordinates the Program.

Some events are held once during the semester, like the Welcoming Event to receive the Program's participants at the beginning of each semester, and extension events in general, like the Exhibition of the University of Brasília's Undergraduate Programs, which introduces the Student Mentoring Program as an intervention strategy in the transition to university and to the undergraduate Nursing course.

In addition, there are workshops and courses about themes of interest to students and the Gratefulness Event, held at the end of each semester - a get-together in which the participants evaluate the Program.

Finally, the mentoring sessions, the great highlight of the Program, are specific moments between mentor and mentee. There are 22 pairs each semester on average, formed by students - a horizontal student-to-student relationship.

The sessions happen based on the demand of each pair and, therefore, the frequency is not previously defined. In spite of this, these are not random meetings; on the contrary,



they are held based on the mission statement that is discussed and established by each pair at the beginning of the mentoring process and refers to the purpose, or rather, to what they expect to achieve with their relationship and partnership.

Mentor and mentee are free to conduct the sessions in the modality they want, either in face-to-face encounters in the university, or in virtual sessions mediated by e-mail and WhatsApp. The option is registered when they execute the mentoring contract.

In the mentoring sessions, each mentee meets his or her mentor to address specific academic matters and even personal matters. It is at this moment that the pairs share their expectations, difficulties, interests, explanations and specific plans about activities and opportunities offered by the university and the Nursing course, as well as support and study guidance - and, more important than all these, it is in the sessions that they develop and strengthen the ties and bonds that join them.

Mentoring relationships between students: Reflections and dialogic resonances

Why a mentoring relationship?

The mentors expressed the desire to learn with another person and share their own experience of academic life as a possibility to welcome and help the mentees, either because they did not have this support in their trajectory and now they can offer it to someone, or as an attitude of thankfulness for the support they received when they were mentees in the past:

I want to create a bond with the mentee to help him/her [...]. I want to be an example and I want to provide guidance. I intend to exchange experiences so that both of us can learn together. (Mentor A)

When I started university, I felt alone, I felt lost and I did not have anyone to help me. It took me a long time to feel used to it. So, I believe helping new students will be an excellent experience - to them and to me. An opportunity to live something new, a new experience. (Mentor B)

I am anxious to meet him and explain how UnB functions, where things are. I wish someone had done this for me when I started university. (Mentor C)

Having a person to rely on when you have questions, someone with whom you can share your insecurities about the academic journey, is very important. My main motivation is that I know I can contribute to this journey, in the same way that some people contributed to mine. (Mentor D)



I was a mentee; now I want to contribute to the Program by being a mentor. I like the Program very much. (Mentor E)

I would like to help other people, answering their questions about the university and disseminating what it has to offer, because in my first two semesters, I was quite “lost” and the mentoring program helped me a lot; I want to pass on what I learned. (Mentor F)

The mentors’ motivations reveal empathy and affection as a way of welcoming the other in the self and, at the same time, the possibility of recognizing the self in the other - the commitment to the other’s need and cause²¹.

Similarly, the mentees’ motivations reveal, beyond the desire to be helped in their academic journey by a more experienced colleague, willingness to exchange experiences, to receive and give, to learn and teach with a critical and reflective mind.

Getting integrated into the course with the help of people who have a little more experience of university life than I do. (Mentee A)

My motivation is the desire to live new experiences, both personal and academic, improving the basic knowledge I have about the action of nursing, developing new communication and comprehension skills, and creating trust and partnership bonds, not only with the mentors, but also with all the other Program participants. I want to seize all the opportunities UnB can offer me, because I believe the mentoring program will be the first of many projects in which I want to participate and which can contribute to my education, both my professional and human education, improving my relationship of empathy with the other - something that cannot be learned only inside the classroom. (Mentee B)

I am motivated to help and be helped in the world of opportunities and experiences that UnB is. (Mentee C)

I wish to really know what it means to be a mentee and to acquire experience so I can mentor other students in the future. I would like to acquire experience to be able to align my professional perspectives and I believe the Program is the front door to a journey of knowledge. (Mentee D)

In the mentoring context, it is expected that a partnership of reciprocal learning is built where mentor and mentee learn and develop; after all, mentors know about matters and have had experiences that their mentees have not, in the personal and/or academic spheres. Mentees, in turn, also have knowledge and experiences that their mentors do not have.



No one is in a higher level, no one is in a lower level, or, as Freire stated, “no one is superior to anyone”. Both need to recognize themselves as equals: it is necessary to be humble to recognize that the other has something to contribute and really share feelings, expectations and needs²². After all, no one is absolutely ignorant and no one is absolutely wise - they are students who, in communion, want to know more.

Mentors and mentees show they are increasingly aware they are not sufficient in themselves and are not completely formed. Thus, the mentoring relationship is seen as a possibility to (re)learn and be with the other, towards alterity:

I think the Program is a two-way street for the growth of both parties. (Mentor G)

I hope we can talk and help each other a lot, because I still have much to learn, too. (Mentee E)

I hope I can help my mentee and that we can learn with each other. (Mentor H)

Alterity constitutes the subject and points to an unfinished and incomplete being in a permanent condition of “becoming”, who makes and remakes him/herself constantly, with the other and based on the other. And it is by becoming more and more aware of his/her incompleteness that the subject moves towards the adventure of searching for knowledge that is still unknown, of searching for what can be but has not happened yet, for what already is, but can be different; in short, the subject searches for “being more” and for humanization²³.

The value of mentoring and its resonances

The Program has enabled students to develop experiences of solidarity, a link between peers, and a sincere concern for the other that allow the concrete development of a collective that is not marked by competition²⁴.

I have learned the importance of walking together with the freshmen, trying to help them and learning, with them, ways of making the journey in UnB as easy as possible. (Mentor I)

I had to read many UnB websites and notices to be able to answer all my mentee’s questions, which demanded time, but I could learn together with him, like, for example, the entire process of choosing and organizing the scientific initiation. (Mentor J)

To me, it was a period of learning and personal growth. Participating in the Program, I learned that information should be shared, that nobody has all the answers but, with what I know and what my colleague knows, we can learn a lot. (Mentee F)



The students also mentioned, as important contributions resulting from the mentoring process, improved integration, better participation in the course, support received to organize and plan academic activities, knowledge of the opportunities that the university offers, improved oral skills in presentation of works in scientific events, and even new perspectives and possibilities for their professional future:

The Program has contributed to a better interpersonal relationship and participation in the course. (Mentee G)

I liked very much to participate in the Program because it helped me to communicate better, to enhance my leadership skills, to manage my time so that I could do everything I wanted. (Mentor K)

The mentoring Program contributed a lot to my academic and personal development. (Mentee H)

It helped me to understand the functioning of UnB and of the Nursing course, and also to learn about the universe of possibilities. It is helping me to make choices that are more assertive in the academic path. (Mentee I)

I have learned to express myself and communicate better in public. The first banners and abstracts that I wrote and presented in scientific events were about the Program. After them, I submit abstracts to events whenever I can. (Mentor L)

I liked the mentoring Program very much because it opened my eyes beyond the obligatory disciplines of the grid; I discovered a world of opportunities UnB offers in and out of the undergraduate course, and it helped me organize myself and plan my future after university. (Mentee J)

I believe I started to think about the future as a professional, and the mentoring Program brought me a foresight as a teacher, something I did not have before. (Mentor M)

These reports corroborate the results of another study about a Peer Tutorship Program of the Psychology course of a public university in which students highlighted, as positive points of the tutorship, clarifications about the university and the course, help in the management of their time, personal development and improvement in their hearing skills, not to mention personal satisfaction²⁵.



However, more than this, the mentoring relationships helped students to be more sensitive to the other, to pay attention to the other's needs and to put themselves in the other's shoes; ultimately, the mentoring program helped them to become nurses who are more humane.

My hearing and my ability to put myself in the other's shoes has improved.
(Mentor N)

The Program helps us to be more sensitive to our fellow human beings, to perceive our mentee's academic needs; it helps us to be more humane, in the condition of nurses. I am sure I will really take this sensitivity to my fellow human beings, the desire of helping them in anything I can. (Mentor O)

It is necessary to contrast these resonances with the competitiveness that damages the academic environment, which, grounded on superiority and self-sufficiency, is naturalized in the discourse of many nursing students as synonymous with one's ability to overcome problems and with maintaining a distance from the other²⁴.

From omissions in order to avoid competition for seats in monitoring programs, internships and exams, to self-sufficiency when students feel more qualified than their peers, thinking they are not in the same level and will not reach them, the literature shows that the experiences which pervade the daily routine of many nursing students drive them away from each other. This occurs because they see the other students as potential competitors and/or as potential means to the fulfilment of personal objectives²⁴.

Solidarity requires us to truly take off our individualism, which places selfishness above altruism and vainly values solipsistic ambitions, on behalf of the self's solidarity with the other²¹.

Thus, we found that the Mentoring Program has contributed to the construction of humanized and dialogic relationships based on solidarity among nursing students during their journey in the university.

More than contributing to academic and social integration, the mentoring process can foster the development of healthier and more collaborative relationships beyond the walls of the University, which can be seen, for example, in the relationship between students and the healthcare team and between students and healthcare users.

Final remarks

The resonances of the Peer Mentoring Program in Nursing point to mentoring as a potential humanizing and transformative strategy in the nursing students' educational trajectory. By means of dialogic relationships, these students could experience and develop skills and values of a relational and reflective praxis, something that is still very limited in health curricula but, at the same time, is essential to the construction of a collective work that lays the foundation for the area of health and nursing.



In addition to potentializing academic and social integration by strengthening more humanized academic relationships among students during university life, especially in the period of transition to university, it is expected that the mentoring process between students resonates dialogically on the relations they establish with patients and with the work team in curricular internship settings, and also in the life of these future nurses, who will soon be leaders of healthcare teams, supervisors of interns and/or nursing residents.

Finally, the reflections of this work are pertinent to support the development of further investigations with the objective of better understanding the experience and the impact of the Mentoring Program on the personal and academic development of nursing students.

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Authors' contribution

Mariana André Honorato Franzoi was responsible for the conception and design of the project, discussion of the results, for the writing of the manuscript, the critical review of the content, and for the approval of the manuscript's final version. Gisele Martins was responsible for the conception and design of the project, critical review of the content and for the approval of the manuscript's final version.

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Trata-se de relato da experiência a respeito do Programa de Mentoria Estudantil em Enfermagem entre pares da Universidade de Brasília (UnB), com enfoque nas relações de apoio e aprendizado mútuo estabelecidas entre os estudantes. As narrativas dos estudantes registradas em formulários *on-line* aplicados a cada edição do Programa desvelam a construção de relações mais humanizadas, solidárias e dialógicas constituídas a partir do processo de *mentoring*. Os estudantes puderam vivenciar e desenvolver habilidades e valores de uma práxis de natureza relacional e reflexiva, tão essencial na construção do trabalho coletivo, fundante para a área da saúde e da enfermagem. As ressonâncias dessa experiência perpassam seres inacabados e incompletos que, ao se tornarem cada vez mais conscientes do próprio inacabamento, podem se movimentar permanentemente na busca de desenvolverem autonomia e novas potencialidades em sua jornada acadêmica.

Palavras-chave: Tutoria. Estudantes de enfermagem. Educação superior. Diálogo.

Se trata del relato de la experiencia con relación al programa de Tutoría Estudiantil en Enfermería entre pares de la Universidad de Brasilia, con enfoque en las relaciones de apoyo y aprendizaje mutuo establecidas entre los estudiantes. Las narrativas de los estudiantes, registradas en formularios *online* aplicados a cada edición del programa, revelan la construcción de relaciones más humanizadas, solidarias y dialógicas, constituidas a partir del proceso de *mentoring*. Los alumnos pudieron experimentar y desarrollar habilidades y valores de una praxis de naturaleza relacional y reflexiva, tan esencial en la construcción del trabajo colectivo, que sirve de base para el área de la salud y de la enfermería. Las resonancias de esa experiencia pasan por seres inacabados e incompletos que, al volverse cada vez más conscientes de estar inacabados, pueden moverse permanentemente en la búsqueda del desarrollo de autonomía y nuevas potencialidades en su jornada académica.

Palabras clave: Tutoría. Estudiantes de enfermería. Educación superior. Diálogo.

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