



Ubuntu Pedagogy: An Enabling and Empowering Approach for Peer Assisted Learning

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Abstract

Peer assisted learning (PAL) is integral to student learning in higher education and provides opportunities for learning that extend beyond academic support. This study explores how students perceive the peer support received from tutors, mentors, retention officers and teaching assistants. Principles of Ubuntu pedagogy, namely support from a position of love and care, building positive relationships, working collectively and nurturing students' minds underpin this study. Qualitative surveys with closed and open-ended questions were administered for data generation to garner perceptions of academic and social interventions. It allowed participants to articulate their experiences and viewpoints in their own words, providing rich insights and perspectives. Findings revealed that those who provided peer support are epistemic agents facilitating pedagogical encounters, and in this dialogical process both epistemic agents and students develop reciprocally. This study foregrounds a novel approach to peer support where the principles of Ubuntu are central to opening vistas for student learning, empowerment and success. The study contributes to strategies on the role of indigenous knowledge systems in transforming peer-to-peer engagement and recommends that tacit Ubuntu values be made overt in PAL training programmes.

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Section: Special Issues
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Publication

Submission: 20 February 2025
Revised: 2 July 2025
Accepted: 23 February 2026
Online First: 16 October 2026
Published:

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Practitioner Notes

1. Drawing on the inherent qualities and values of peer support champions (PSCs) such as Ubuntu principles could be extended to other indigenous knowledge systems for Peer Assisted Learning (PAL).
2. Embedding Ubuntu principles into a PAL programme requires peer support training to be intentionally designed to include these attributes.
3. The proposed model of including qualities and values in peer support training enhances the benefits of PAL.

Keywords

Epistemic access; higher education; peer support; Ubuntu pedagogy

Introduction

Student learning in higher education (HE) is facilitated in various ways in different places, spaces and modalities. The default understanding of student learning was in-person on-campus academic engagement, which changed to emergency remote learning. This unexpected shift as a result of the global Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, was a trying time in HE where the realities of learning in isolation became all too stark. This reality was especially challenging in the South African HE context where students with diverse academic and social needs struggled to seamlessly continue learning in isolation. Against this background, Peer assisted learning (PAL) offered opportunities for students to remain motivated during unforeseen changes in learning, teaching and assessments (LTA). Although this study was conducted when LTA was mediated in hybrid modes of LTA provision, the principles of PAL and the need for affective engagement remain, irrespective of the LTA mode.

This study focuses on peer support as pedagogy for student learning with reference to the support roles that peer support champions (PSCs), i.e., tutors, mentors, retention officers (ROs) and teaching assistants (TAs) assume in enhancing student learning. It foregrounds the perspectives of students who received support during their course of study. Principles of Ubuntu pedagogy underpin the premise of this study, drawing on peer support as an enactment of social justice. This study shows that principles of Ubuntu pedagogy are inherent in student engagement and underscores how indigenous knowledge systems and practices form part of societies, and in this context, students' learning spaces. Peer support focuses on care and upliftment of others, promoting access to learning (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016), such that all students are afforded the potential to excel in HE. The thesis presented here is that if students feel valued and engage in caring interactions, it supports positivity and motivation to achieve their full potential. Yet, the affective domain that focuses on emotions, values, dispositions and feelings, is not always afforded attention due to the overwhelming focus on cognitive and academic prowess. Since this study was conducted at a South African university which espouses the principles of Ubuntu in its strategic vision (CPUT, 2021), it was deemed fit to draw on African cultural norms of Ubuntu as a framework for affective factors that impact student learning. Ubuntu speaks to indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being, which simultaneously address the ongoing decolonisation agenda of HE. Indigenous knowledge systems as outlined by the Department of Science and Technology (2004, p. 10) refers to the 'affirmation of African cultural values in the face of globalisation ... given the need to promote a positive African identity'. In this sense, PAL is synergistic with indigenous ways of being, where strategies used by PSCs draw on Ubuntu principles.

This study highlights how indigenous knowledge systems, specifically the humanistic Ubuntu practices in peer-to-peer engagements, contribute to transformative learning experiences. While transformative learning has its origins with Mezirow (1997), Hoggan's research on transformative learning as metatheory, defines transformative learning as 'processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualises, and interacts with the world' (2016, p.71). These experiences encompass interactions with the self, epistemology, ontology and behaviour. Within the context of student learning and Ubuntu pedagogy, the findings reveal profound changes in how students have transformed as a result of PAL, which could be categorised as transformative learning experiences.

The objective of this paper is to foreground humanistic Ubuntu philosophy and practices as an imperative for undergirding academic peer support. Ubuntu is espoused in this institution's strategic plan and Vision 2030, which speaks of the oneness domain of 'human-centricity' to '[develop] a deep sense of caring about the wellness of others' (CPUT, 2021, p.4). In addition to the oneness domain, the relational capability of humanity and care forms part of this university's graduate attributes, requiring graduates to 'stand in the shoes of others, to understand their needs, values and cultures so that what is being worked on can have optimal effects and/or the best chances of success' (CPUT, 2017, p. 4). This culture of understanding the needs of others and responding with care is central to Ubuntu as well as to the basic principles of peer support as envisaged by this university.

This study was conducted in the business and management sciences faculty at a university of technology in the Western Cape, South Africa. The researchers were academics in the faculty, who co-ordinated and had oversight on the PAL programme across all departments, hence the focus of the study being on one specific faculty at the institution. The focus is on undergraduate qualifications in a range of business-related fields, where students are linguistically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse, and have varied educational backgrounds and learning circumstances. The university attracts students from all over South Africa, and against this background of geographic and other demographics, some students may require additional support and academic intervention to succeed.

As a student success and retention strategy in the faculty, academic and social peer support is offered to first-year students as part of the First-Year Experience programme, as they acculturate to the new environment and the academic demands of HE. Peer support is, however, available to students across all levels of learning. The types of peer support available include tutors, mentors, ROs and TAs, who are senior registered students with an interest in providing peer support. These peer support champions (PSCs) receive customised training to equip them for their specific peer support roles. For example, TAs support lecturers with in-class support, materials development and other related activities, while tutors provide peer-to-peer academic support at all levels of undergraduate study. Mentors offer social support to acclimatise to first-year studies and university life whereas ROs monitor and track mainly first-year students who are under-performing due to absenteeism and other reasons. The PSCs work closely with lecturers who provide the required academic guidance and resources to ensure that the peer support project is implemented meaningfully at the departmental level. Peer support is an important student intervention and in the context of this study relates to students in undergraduate diploma programmes.

This study therefore asks: 1) How do indigenous knowledge systems, specifically the humanistic Ubuntu practices in peer-to-peer engagements, contribute to transformative learning experiences?

2) How did students experience Peer assisted learning (PAL) in hybrid modalities when they needed additional academic and social support?

3) What Ubuntu principles were brought to the fore as a result of peer assisted learning (PAL) during hybrid learning?

Literature

Peer-Assisted Learning

Education is by its very nature a social construct, where learning occurs with and from others (Boud & Cohen, 2014). Learning usually happens in physical social spaces where students engage with subject content facilitated by lecturers and from peer interaction. One of the most profound forms of student learning in HE could be attributed to peer learning, where a more knowledgeable other provides tuition in various ways to support peers. Peer support champions can relate to student struggles and challenges having followed the same course of study, and students who receive support can communicate with a more knowledgeable other on a student-to-student level. By way of clarification, 'peer learning refers to the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from one another without the immediate intervention of a teacher' and where 'advanced students in the same class, or those in later years, taking on limited aspects of a teacher's instructional or pedagogic role' (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999, pp. 414-415). In keeping with Boud, et al, (1999) definition of peer learning, Hargreaves, Ketnor, Marshall and Russell (2022) describe PAL as that which typically involves student volunteers who facilitate sessions for groups of students in lower years with their studies, as is the case with this study. While PAL is initiated and monitored by lecturers in terms of the kinds of support to be provided, lecturers are not usually involved or present in PAL sessions, which may take the form of individual student-to-student tutorials, group support sessions, or facilitating study groups and team projects.

Peer learning has been used extensively in all disciplines due to its educational and lifelong learning skills that are accrued by both peer support champions, as well as recipients of peer support. Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999), and Okoro et al. (2021) aver that PAL fosters collaboration, teamwork, and develops student communities of practice and communication skills. In addition, critical enquiry and reflection are intrinsic to finding solutions to questions when the lecturer is not present to facilitate learning. PSCs, i.e., tutors, mentors, ROs and TAs, gain greater insights to people skills and how students learn, which affords them opportunities to consolidate knowledge and subject content. Similarly, 'learning to cooperate with others to reach mutual goals seems a necessary prerequisite for operating in a complex society' (Boud et al., 1999, p. 415). Research shows that PAL is unequivocally beneficial for PAL champions as well as students who receive peer support (Boud et al., 1999; Mckay, 2016; Okoro et al., 2021; Hargreaves et al., 2022).

Research on PAL focuses mainly on the cognitive influence of PAL on academic learning (Makala, 2017; Muchineripi, 2022; Slabbert, 2024). This study, however, relates to the importance of affective aspects in creating environments conducive to peer-assisted learning specifically. Although this study was conducted during a hybrid LTA mode, the need for affective engagement applies to all learning modalities. The principles of PAL as learning support for peers remain the same irrespective of the LTA modality. Within the South African context, the education system and national infrastructure were ill-prepared to address the immediate challenges of poor internet connectivity and access to technology which often scuppered access to PAL support. While PAL was well intended for continuity during remote LTA, it was nevertheless challenging for PSCs and students. This study shows that they addressed and overcame these challenges using principles of humanity, relationality and walking in the shoes of others. This inherent application of Ubuntu principles has relevance for future PAL.

Principles of Ubuntu Pedagogy Supporting Peer Learning Engagement

Several authors have shared perspectives on Ubuntu pedagogy (Omodan, 2022; Omodan & Diko, 2021; Letseka, 2014; Metz, 2011; Van der Walt, 2010), and various definitions have been formulated for reference purposes. Ubuntuism is an age-old African philosophy and cultural practice, but research on Ubuntu pedagogy is a recent phenomenon that emanated mainly from debates on decolonising the curriculum within the South African HE context. The concept and practice of Ubuntu derive from African traditions with literal interpretations that 'precipitates humanity, love, compassion, oneness and kindness' (Omodan, 2022, 98). It is a philosophy and cultural norm that represents social justice in the sense that it embraces social values of inclusion, participation and respect for all. Ubuntu pedagogy, then, refers to the science of teaching and learning using Ubuntu principles within the context of African and indigenous knowledge systems, with a lesser reliance on Western thought and ideologies to inform African education per se. While decolonising the curriculum and indigenous knowledge are important, the focus of this paper relates to the humanity aspects of Ubuntu pedagogy that create enabling learning environments for learning with others. Ubuntu pedagogy adds humanity to social constructivism, where learning from and with others is not only cognitive but foregrounds the affective notion of being a person first with relational needs, above all else.

As noted previously in this paper, Ubuntu pedagogy focuses primarily on the affective principles of Ubuntu's philosophy of humanity as referenced by Ukpokodu (2016), Blackwood (2018), Ngubane and Makua (2021), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2022). While teaching and learning have largely focused on cognition and knowledge acquisition, there seems to be a dearth of research on how the affective domain of feelings, emotions and attitudes impact learning. This paper contributes to this debate in terms of how the affective domain relates to peer support in HE, and aligns with Ngubane and Makua's (2021, p. 2) rationale 'to advance justifications for the rethinking of teaching and learning in HE from [an] Ubuntu pedagogical perspective'.

Ukpokodu (2016) observed, and as expounded on by Ngubane and Makua (2021), Ubuntu pedagogy consists of certain principles that are transformative as a pedagogical strategy in student relations. These principles are recognition of self and others; building positive relationships; working cooperatively; nurturing students' minds, and teaching from a position of love and care. It is to these principles to which we now turn. Each principle, as outlined in Ngubane and Makua (2021), is elucidated briefly to serve as a lens for data analysis and discussion.

Recognition of self and others relates to the African perspective that it is through engagement with others that opens opportunities for learning collectively and collaboratively. Interaction and participation with others allow for sharing ideas, knowledge and experiences that promote learning. Recognition of self, i.e., acknowledging one's strengths and weaknesses and understanding others' strengths and weaknesses is an interdependent learning opportunity to know oneself in relation to others. Building positive relationships calls for engagement premised on mutual respect, love and care, attentive listening and being open to learning from others. Peer support entails working cooperatively and collaboratively and valuing all contributions. In this sense, 'Ubuntu pedagogy ensures that students work together and assist one another to learn and understand the learning material' (Ngubane & Makua, 2021, p. 6). Working cooperatively contributes to nurturing students' minds within contexts that are interactive and participatory. Learning is a social construct, which implies that learning

happens best in environments where students share ideas, respond to questions and debates, and where students are encouraged to learn by sharing thoughts, ideas and perspectives. Learning is nurtured when students can identify with others and feel comfortable drawing on what fellow students know and can share. (Refer also to Goebel & Maistry, (2019)). Lastly, teaching from a position of love and care is an act of humanity in and of itself. As noted by Ngubane and Makua, (2021, p. 6), 'teaching that truly inspires, humanises and empowers students not only comes from good strategies and perfect curriculum, but it is also the pedagogy that is love-centred'.

Literature on the importance of acknowledging the affective domain, reveals that 'emotions exert an important influence on learning behaviours and outcomes ... and pervade every aspect of learning, influencing students' goals and motivation, learning behaviour and outcomes (Goebel & Maistry, 2019, p. 19). Similarly, Dison and Collette's study on online and hybrid curriculum design supported the need for 'affective dimensions of learning such as trust and care' and that 'webs of support' for student learning 'constitutes a necessary element of a just pedagogy' (2023, p. 85). In HE, the need for cognitive development and cognition garners the most attention regarding student learning. Yet the affective domain is equally important in supporting cognition and epistemic access. To this end, Datt (2021, p. 16)) 'draws attention to the need of constructing a theoretical basis for creating a taxonomy for affective domain just as it is in taxonomy of cognitive domain'. This study aligns with previous studies that promote recognition of the affective domain as an important component of HE studies (Datt, 2021; Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Goebel & Maistry, 2019) and contributes to strategies that incorporate indigenous norms of Ubuntu into PAL.

Method

This study foregrounds the perspectives of university students who received support and explores the nature of peer assisted learning (PAL) interaction. These students who sought assistance from the tutors, mentors, ROs and TAs were mainly first-year students in various departments across the business and management sciences faculty. To this end, an interpretive paradigm was adopted for this qualitative study as it sought to gain a deep understanding of participants' perceptions and insights into the peer support they received (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Moreover, the interpretive paradigm allowed the collection of rich insider views enabling the researchers 'to treat the context of the research and its situation as unique considering the given circumstances associated as well as participants involved' (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p. 42) as articulated above.

Surveys using closed and open-ended questions were administered to garner participants' perspectives, experiences and accounts of the peer support they received. Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey and McEvoy aver that with open-ended questions 'participants respond by typing responses in their own words, rather than selecting from predetermined response options, [to] produce the rich and complex accounts of the type of sense-making typically of interest to qualitative researchers' (2021, p. 642). Peer support champions were asked to share the Google survey link with all students whom they supported for the year. The qualitative survey was forwarded electronically at the end of the academic year, with all the questions presented to all participants in the same order. This allowed participants to share insights into peer support received during the entire academic year. An explanation of the purpose of the study and anonymised participation in the study was included in the introduction

to the online survey, together with the contact details of the researchers for further information or queries. Participation in the survey was voluntary; participants were anonymous and could withdraw from participation at any time while the link was open for responses. The researchers were granted ethics clearance by the university. Only the researchers had access to the responses.

The qualitative survey consisted of nine closed questions and eight open-ended questions, designed to provide a profile of the participants who received support and establish the kinds of peer support provided. These closed questions addressed the year of study, the type of peer support participants sought, whether peer support was easily accessible, how participants came to know about peer support in their departments. It also sought to determine whether PSCs were willing to help after hours, how often participants sought support, whether peer support was useful and whether the PSCs were able to support participants with the kinds of support requested. The open-ended questions followed the closed questions to allow participants to share in their own words their views and perceptions of their peer support engagements (Braun et al. 2021). The open-ended questions probed the usefulness of peer support; the kinds of support and assistance with which PSCs assisted; ways in which it was helpful to work with PSCs; the challenges with the PSCs; and whether working with PSCs helped to improve understanding of subject content and other support requested, amongst others. The survey link was open for two weeks for participants to complete the survey.

Students' perspectives of receiving student support were analysed according to Ubuntu pedagogy principles to determine the relevance and prevalence of Ubuntu pedagogy in peer support engagement. The data were analysed through thematic analysis using the five principles of Ubuntu pedagogy, namely: (1) recognition of self and others; (2) building positive relationships; (3) working cooperatively; (4) nurturing students minds; and (5) teaching from a position of love and care. These principles were used as prompts for data coding and for developing themes. Braun and Clarke note that 'thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data [and] provide a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data' (2006, 81-82). To derive data themes, an iterative process of thematic data analysis was followed, starting with engagement with literature on peer support and Ubuntu pedagogy from which the five Ubuntu pedagogy themes were selected as data analysis prompts.

On the first level of analysis, participant responses that could potentially align with one of the five Ubuntu pedagogy principles were identified, and responses that had no or minimal substance, for example, one-word answers, without substantiating qualitative questions, were not considered for analysis and discussion. The second level of analysis required a closer reading of semantic content for coding the data, to determine which excerpts aligned with a particular Ubuntu pedagogy principle. The semantic content grouped in Ubuntu pedagogy codes was further grouped into patterns of meaning or themes, to theorise the significance of the data and their broader meanings and implications to Ubuntu pedagogy principles. Additional themes were identified, which served mainly as recommendations for future peer support developments. With the third level of analysis, the data were reviewed and analysed to determine the dominant principles implied in each data segment.

As faculty members involved with peer support, the subjectivity of the researchers' insider perspective was acknowledged given that researchers 'cannot free themselves of their

theoretical and epistemological commitments' (Braun, 2006, 12). To minimise subjectivity, the data were coded based on surface-level semantic significance to the theoretical perspectives of Ubuntu pedagogy which served as the basis of this study. Additionally, cognisant of the importance of the integrity and credibility of the study, the researchers declared their positionality upon seeking ethics approval from the faculty. The study was limited to a single faculty at a university and the findings are not generalisable to other faculties or other HE contexts.

Results

Responses were received from 83 respondents, including 66 first-year students (79.5%), 11 second-year students (13.3%), and six third-year students (7.2%). Of the 83 survey participants, 64 participants (77.1%) consulted tutors, 18 participants (21.7%) consulted TAs, 30 participants (36.1%) consulted mentors and two participants (2.4%) consulted retention officers. The participants were mainly first-year students totalling 66 (79.5%), 11 (13.3%) second-year students and six (7.2%) third-year students.

On the issue of access to PAL, 63.9% of participants indicated that the lecturer informed them of PAL whereas 36.1% heard about it via other ways. 89.2% of participants noted that PSCs were easily contactable and accessible whilst 10.8% responded with a 'no'. An overall majority of 95.2 % participants reported that the PAL was beneficial. Participants reported that PSCs were available as follows:

Table 1

A sample of survey questions and responses

	Survey Question	Always	Sometimes	Never
1.	How often did you contact the tutor/teaching assistant/ mentor/retention officer after hours (after 5 pm in the evenings), and on weekends?	15 (18.1%)	57 (68.7%)	11 (13.3%)
2.	Did the tutor, teaching assistant, mentors and retention officer provide support after hours when you requested support?	47 (56.6%)	25 (30.1%)	9 (10.8)
3.	Was the tutor/teaching assistant/ mentor/retention officer able to support you with the kinds of queries that you requested?	64 (77.1%)	18 (21.7%)	1 (1.2%)
4.	Do you think that working with a tutor / teaching assistant / mentor / retention officer helped to improve your understanding of the subject content and other support requested?	65 (78.3%)	16 (19.3%)	2 (2.4%)

Based on the summary in Table 1, collectively, 86,8% of students contacted PSCs after hours, 86.7% of PSCs provided support after hours, 98.8% could support students with the kinds of assistance required, and 97.6% of participants noted that PSCs assisted with improved understanding of subject content and other support. The data show that PSCs could ably assist participants with the kinds of support required, always (77.1%) and sometimes (21.7%) as noted by participants. RO data and results do not constitute a noteworthy contribution to this study with a 2% response rate of RO engagement.

Discussion

The qualitative surveys produced rich insights into participants' peer support engagements and offered the researchers valuable accounts of participants' perceptions of PAL. The Ubuntu pedagogy principles, as espoused by Ngubane and Makua (2021), served as the analytical lens to explore the affective domain of student learning, which extends beyond cognition and knowledge application. The affective domain and the cognitive domain of learning are two sides of the same coin, with one impacting the other in various ways. Data analysis revealed that some data excerpts straddled more than one Ubuntu pedagogy principle. The data analysis and discussion draw on findings of the survey and verbatim excerpts of participant responses derived through thematic semantic analysis.

Teaching assistants assisted with organising group chats, students' introduction to the online learning platform and provided detailed assistance with assignment corrections. Tutors provided academic support to improve understanding of subject content. Examples of support noted by participants included explaining applications of MS Office such as Excel and PowerPoint for presentations, "learning a few formulas for financial management", "understand accounting concepts", "planning and time management", "setting up a good mindset for the university environment", [making] "us understand the work better as they would explain everything that we didn't understand", "setting assignments and exercises" to be completed, and facilitating economics principles.

Mentors provided support to first-year students, as part of retention strategies of the institutional first-year experience. The role of the mentor is to assist with acclimatising to tertiary studies and to cope with the demands of being a university student. However, this role often morphed into providing academic support since social factors invariably influence academic progress. Giving context, the following excerpts from first-year students point out the need for social and academic support: "When I am not feeling too well academically I can count on her. She is always there to talk to when I have lots of questions about the course and other stuff also; Mentors were supporting me throughout my academic anxiety, mentors were providing some tips on how I can manage my time effectively; My mentor assisted me when I was dealing with things like my mental health; Mentors assisted me when I was struggling with time management and they also assisted when I was dealing with my stresses.; My mentor helped to overcome a sleeping disorder and stress". These excerpts suggest that participants were not always able to manage the challenges that they experienced which might impact academic progress. As with TAs and tutors, mentor training is pivotal to providing knowledge and skills on how to listen and respond to the kinds of challenges that participants experience. In certain instances, mentors would refer participants to the institutional Student Counselling Unit for professional support or encourage participants to consider self-referrals should personal problems affect learning and development. Retention Officers (RO) assisted with following up on first-year students who were habitually absent. However, the response rate of RO engagement was low at only 2%. As such, it does not represent a significant contribution to this study and was not analysed.

Provision of Peer Support

Peer support was valued by 95.2% of participants who reported that the support they received was helpful concerning appropriate assistance provided. The findings captured in Table 1 above, show that PSCs were mostly available to provide support after hours and could ably

assist with the kinds of support requested. Bearing in mind that this study was conducted during a hybrid LTA environment, participants were often online beyond class time and would seek assistance as and when this was needed, irrespective of whether it was after hours. Although PSCs did not appreciate being contacted after hours, they were cognisant that many first-years might not be coping with online learning and were supportive in any event. The majority of participants noted that receiving peer support was advantageous to understanding subject content which contributed to improved academic performance. PSCs responded to participants' needs and provided requisite support to enable learning and increased engagement with subject content. Assisting participants with clarifying work to improve understanding and application of subject content was a common theme from participants regarding tutor assistance.

Peer support, whether online and in-person, was helpful for participants to improve academically. These improvements were noted with reference to how peer support assisted participants in different ways: "Academically I was growing; They minimised my student weaknesses, and they truly personalised the learning; Made me understand everything that I did not know; I improved my marks. It really helped me a lot; In contact classes they were good, and their teaching strategy was outstanding; The work became clearer after tutor sessions; They make (sic) me understand more and be motivated". These excerpts suggest that PSCs were interested in their peers who relied on them for support. They made concerted efforts to clarify understandings, which positively influenced the academic performance of participants who received support. These findings reinforce the importance of PAL (Birmingham, Boylan & Ryan, 2023) as a profound form of learning - PSCs can identify with the fears, challenges and struggles of first-year students and respond in a way to which first-year students can relate.

Within the hybrid learning environment at the time, a recurring theme from the data was that "face-to-face was helpful" and that "online sometimes doesn't work". Participants reported that the online space was alienating and lonesome when trying to make sense of challenging concepts and applications, and preferred meeting with PSCs in person when challenges arose. This speaks to the necessity of in-person social interaction when acclimatising to first-year studies. The gap between high school and university should not be underestimated (Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Pather and Dorosamy, 2018) and PSCs offer an avenue to bridge the personal and academic divide that first-year students might experience.

Principles of Ubuntu Pedagogy in PAL

The five Ubuntu pedagogy principles namely recognition of self and others, building positive relationships, working cooperatively, nurturing students' minds and teaching from a position of love and care, focusing on themed responses, are discussed below.

Recognition of Self and Others

The ability to know oneself to assist others was evident in the responses about assistance provided by tutors and mentors. Two participants who received tutor support commented, firstly that "my tutors made me see everything is possible, and my marks also improved because of them" and, secondly that tutors "are amazing, I never asked for assistance that much but when I did ask for it they were always willing to help, the regular checkups also encouraged me a lot. I'm grateful for their work". The reference to 'see everything is possible' suggests that the tutor relates to the student having been in a similar position before and

knowing the composite requirements of student learning and student life to achieve academic success. The tutor identified with what the participant was experiencing and could facilitate a transformative stance that the participant indeed could achieve goals and ideals. Important to note, is that the encouragement of 'everything is possible', was uppermost in the participant's mind when noting the survey response, implying that this had left an indelible impression on the participant, i.e., that the tutor recognised the potential for success and achievement.

Tutors assisted participants from a position of having been a first-year student and being eager to share what they had learnt and how they had grown because of participatory learning since their academic journey commenced. This notion of student interactions and participatory learning aligns with Ubuntu pedagogy that "places value on collective learning through interactions with others" (Ngubane & Makua, 2021, p. 7). The reference to encouragement was a recurring theme regarding support provided by tutors and mentors. The example of mentor support being "helpful because every time I was stressed with something, I knew I got a person to talk to (sic), who will encourage me without judgments", reveals the non-judgmental, open stance adopted by mentors. To note, being non-judgmental in student engagement formed part of mentor training. Tertiary studies present challenges and stresses, and often participants need a listening ear of someone who cares and shows interest in them as individuals and recognises their specific need for social support.

Building Positive Relationships

As noted above, mentors provide social support for acculturation to university life and to acclimatise to tertiary studies, with tutors focusing more on academic support. The excerpts on building positive relationships presented here were from participants who received mentor and tutor support respectively. A participant commented, "They are motivational people also because each time I felt like I can't seem to get the work they would make me feel good about myself and reassure me that I'm able to do anything". However, since mentor support was intrinsically and extrinsically empathic, the most expressive responses on building relationships were from mentor support as pointed out by these participants: "We're second family to me, they provided everything I needed in this academic year; You just have that feeling of not being alone and being aware that there are people who'll check up on you and offer assistance whenever you need it as there are times of feeling lonely at university; For some of us, talking to them [mentors] was like talking to a close friend; My mentor was more than what I expected from her, she was there when I needed her the most; Registering late meant that I was behind and unsettled. With the help from my mentor, I easily caught up and could focus; I am an introverted individual who finds it hard to speak up, but since mentors showed love and trust it became easy to talk to them; My mentor was always kind and could easily assist me".

These responses represent engagement, concern, love and care for participants. The need to have a dedicated peer to turn to in times of need was relational to the sense of belonging that participants portrayed. This suggests that engagement was not a clinical tick-box exercise but emanated from a sense of inviting participants into participant fraternities by listening, showing interest, being kind and building relations so that participants felt valued, worthy and cared for. Relationship building such that participants were made to feel valued, like "a close friend" and "second family", and where they referred to "my mentor" [authors' emphasis] reveals the intensity of relations between mentors and students that they supported. This relational aspect of being valued resonates with Ngubane and Makua's (2021, p. 8) claim that "teaching and learning anchored by Ubuntu brings about kindness, caring, togetherness, solidarity,

cooperation and sharing among learners and teachers, which all promote positive relationships". Ultimately, the higher purpose of mentorship is to build relationships with participants by showing empathy, providing encouragement and building confidence for participants to recognise their potential to advance the academic agenda by providing epistemic access for academic success.

The following response regarding tutor support aptly summarises the importance of building reciprocal relations to create an enabling student-tutor learning environment, "... to create a productive working environment, you build a relationship with your tutor and also a tutor builds a relationship with you, discussing shared interests and curricular activities". This excerpt illustrates how "shared interests" provided a sense of belonging for this participant who drew comfort in knowing that peers were like-minded, which set the tone for engagement in curriculum activities. These responses suggest that PSCs were empathic and focused on building positive relationships to develop comfortable, friendly, non-judgmental learning environments in order "to create a productive learning environment".

Working Cooperatively

Peer support champions arranged mainly in-person and online group sessions to complete tasks and exercises shared by lecturers. These sessions provided spaces to consolidate understanding of subject content in non-threatening environments. This was evident as participants who received support expressed this sentiment of cooperative peer support engagements: "Practising question papers together and [providing] assistance on assignments; It wasn't like a teaching class, it was more of a we teach ourselves; The Emails and the groups from WhatsApp were very helpful; It helped me not to be afraid to ask questions". These participant observations confirm the view as expressed by Boud and Cohen (2014) that group peer settings encourage learning and create opportunities to learn from and with one another. In the context of the study, participants were made to feel at ease and confident which stimulated learning and development.

Nurturing Students' Minds

Peer-assisted learning led to shifts in understanding subject content and allaying fears and anxiety of perceived incompetence (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). The PSCs created an enabling learning environment by including participants and giving access to learning enacting social justice. Participants reported that: "She would break things down so that I understand them and she was also patient with me; They made sure that I fully understood the work and if I didn't, they have the patience to explain again until I got it". Student support champions were amenable and adapted to provide the kinds of support that participants required.

Students' academic performance improved through the peer support they received. Participants recounted that: "I was able to achieve it because of the tutorial sessions we had; I got the response back on time and it was helpful; I have learnt better and quicker ways of doing my work; It was helpful in a way that I'm confident that when the exam comes I will be able to do it". As they reflected, they appreciated that PAL "Gave a better understanding on the module; I managed to pass my assignments because of his help; Because after consulting the mentor I got a better and clear understanding of that assessment and I got good marks; After tutors' assistance my marks upgraded".

From these reflections, it is evident that the PSCs' approach of exercising patience and accommodating the varying student needs, instilled confidence and set participants up to succeed academically. These PSCs understood the vulnerabilities of their students and responded appropriately providing these participants access to improved learning experiences. One of the primary purposes of PAL is to share knowledge as the more knowledgeable other, i.e., to nurture students' minds during PAL encounters. The findings reveal a cumulative bank of evidence to this effect.

Teaching from a Position of Love and Care

Ngubane and Makua argue that students thrive in pedagogical environments that are love-centred, as these are empowering learning spaces where students are motivated to overcome challenges, support each other and excel (2021, 6). This rings true in this context as illustrated by the following participants noting: "When I had difficulties understanding certain assignments I didn't understand, always checking up on me on how I'm handling academics and how I'm doing physically and mentally; Getting support made me realise that sometimes you might feel like a failure when there's no one to support you but when you know that there are people whom you can run to seek for help you'll know that you aren't a failure". The participants identified the care displayed by PSCs remarking that "The support they showed was felt; Always going an extra mile for students; Selfless and always willing to assist, no matter how small the query is; My tutor is so, so helpful. I have no words to explain how grateful I am to have her as my tutor. Thanks to her I passed with distinctions".

Participants who received support were clear on the positive value and benefit that PSCs brought to their HE journey. These participants acknowledged the role of PSCs demonstrating the impact of an Ubuntu approach to learning and transformation. They proffered that: "They were excellent and would recommend them to next year's first-year students; I would suggest that any student make use of one of these as they are very helpful in every situation; They help and make sure that we learn more and improving; I want to thank all the tutors for their sterling job; I have never seen such a selfless and helpful person when it comes to supporting someone. These findings show that peer support offers much more than academic cognitive support for student success and that the affective aspects of providing support are equally important. PSCs responded to their students from a place of love and care fostering positive relationships with them. They worked collaboratively and nurtured participants' minds as summarised in the table below.

In summary, the findings revealed that PSCs are epistemic agents actively involved in exploring and finding ways for student development and learning through Ubuntu pedagogy. These PSCs enable pedagogical peer support engagements drawing on innate dispositions to develop and strengthen students they support academically and socially as they navigate the demands of HE. PAL in this faculty is enabled from a place of Ubuntu where students feel a sense of belonging and the possibility of achievement in nurturing, inclusive and cooperative learning environments.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

One of the factors that contributes to the impact and effectiveness of PAL, is that appropriate training and development is provided for PSCs to offer support in their respective PAL roles. Implications for practice would, therefore, include: (1) Ubuntu principles in PAL training; (2) lecturers' oversight to advance Ubuntu principles in PAL, and (3) creating an ecosystem for the enactment of Ubuntu as lifelong attributes. Firstly, training often focuses on facilitating academic learning for peers in the interests of improved student learning and academic outcomes. Given the findings that affective factors provide enabling contexts for peer facilitation and student learning, by implication, PAL training should ideally include affective factors to create awareness of student engagement from a position of love and care. PAL training programmes that incorporate principles of Ubuntu pedagogy underpin the importance of recognition and relationality in peer facilitation. Secondly, at some institutions peer training is facilitated in academic centres external to faculties as was the case at this institution. As such lecturer involvement to include Ubuntu principles in their preparation, planning and discussions with PSCs, would reinforce the practice of Ubuntu in facilitating student support. Feedback sessions with PSCs and students who received support should include discussions on how this pedagogy of relationship building contributed to nurturing students' minds. Thirdly, a peer support ecosystem should be created where all participants inculcate and embrace Ubuntu principles to demonstrate collective agency for reciprocal interaction of pedagogical encounters. In summary, positive and caring dispositions in student engagement should be made overt in the all the steps of PAL preparation. Since Ubuntu philosophy is a way of life, peer support training and provision should form part of developing lifelong learning dispositions in each component of the peer training and provision ecosystem. █

Theoretical perspectives drew on PAL and Ubuntu pedagogy to create enabling environments for student learning. While the overarching precept of Ubuntu relates to relationality and standing in the shoes of others, Ubuntu pedagogy as a theoretical approach to teaching and learning requires further conceptualisation. Literature on Ubuntu pedagogy is a developing field of study and practice, even more so for PAL training. The theoretical gap identified here is the development of an Ubuntu pedagogy framework for PAL implementation. An Ubuntu pedagogy framework for PAL implementation would extend current theoretical perspectives on Ubuntu pedagogy and simultaneously address the practical implication noted above.

Limitations and future research

This study was conducted in one of six faculties at a university of technology with a relatively small sample size of the university population. The findings are, therefore, not generalisable to other faculties or institutions. Future research could replicate this study with other PSC cohorts of the same faculty or with a cross section of PSCs from the six institutional faculties to determine whether similar results and findings would be forthcoming. Similarly, collaborative studies could be conducted with other institutions, as well as a cross-section of demographic groups and disciplines. The findings from such research endeavours might yield additional Ubuntu principles to be incorporated into PAL Ubuntu pedagogy. Ubuntu is associated with African indigenous norms and knowledge systems. However, further research on other indigenous norms, knowledge systems and demographic cohorts might reveal interesting parallels and additions to what this study shows.

Conclusion

This study was conducted when PAL was offered in hybrid modalities and students needed additional academic and social support compared to the in-person PAL mode. To this end, PSCs shifted their approach by applying Ubuntu pedagogy to meet their students' needs. The findings revealed that PAL is much more than academic support and contributes greatly to the growth and development of students' mental and social well-being. Participants reported that they could lean on PSCs when they were anxious, lonely and PAL offered a "...second family to me". Participants responded positively to the affective engagement of the humanistic indigenous Ubuntu approach affording them access to transformative learning experiences (Hoggan, 2016).

To this end, it is recommended that training programmes for PAL should not only focus on cognitive academic knowledge but should be intentionally designed to include African Ubuntu norms of care, love and concern as underpinning values for peer support. The PSCs demonstrated that although they received training to provide the support required in their different student support roles, they drew on inherent qualities and attributes to create an enabling learning environment for students. Designing PAL training programmes that foreground African Ubuntu principles will strengthen PSCs existing innate qualities enhancing their capacity to provide peer support with which are familiar with and respond to in an African learning space.

Besides PAL, there are different ways in which Ubuntu pedagogy may be operationalised and consolidated in the HE curriculum. Since Ubuntu is enacted in practice, learning experiences such as service-learning, community engagement and work-integrated learning present ideal opportunities to infuse Ubuntu principles in LTA. Universities could offer a unit of learning on Ubuntu principles in appropriate subjects as an intentional strategy to actualise this form of indigenous knowledge (Mawere, 2015). Moreover, Ubuntu principles should be included in graduate attributes as part of the decolonisation agenda. As this study shows, Ubuntu pedagogy created enabling avenues for participant empowerment and success providing a different strategy where Ubuntu principles were made manifest through PAL.

Acknowledgements

The authors declare that the required research standards and ethics are adhered to as detailed in the methodology section of this study. To the best of our knowledge, we do not have any conflict of interest, financial or otherwise. Artificial Intelligence was not employed to generate this article. The authors appreciate all students who contributed to the study. The authors note this was a joint project and list the CRediT contributions as follows: Williams: conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing of original draft, review and editing, visualisation, project administration. Scholtz: conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing of original draft, review and editing, visualisation.

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