

ONLINE MENTORING / SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: THE PERSPECTIVE OF VOLUNTEER / MENTOR STUDENTS

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Context and Methodology

Over the past few years, the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the University of Bucharest have implemented outreach programs in which university students, enrolled across a variety of degrees, provide (volunteer) socio-educational support to pre-university students and their families. The programs have a number of organizational specificities tied to the institutional goals of each university, the funding structure of each program and the training and support structure offered by each university. However, they also share some fundamental characteristics that allow for an integrated analysis of both experiences and contribute to an understanding of how participation in mentoring programs contributes to university students' emergent sense of belonging. The three shared features we want to highlight are:

(1) Both programs emerged (since 2020) in response and in the context of the major social and educational challenges precipitated by the global Covid pandemic and post-pandemic transformations. In this respect, both programs connect university students with secondary students (and also primary students in the case of Madrid) at-risk of educational failure to create a socio-educational support system. In both cases, this support is understood from a holistic and ecological perspective (rather than strictly technical support connected to particular HE courses of study); as an opportunity to create spaces for mentoring and accompaniment between university students, youth and their families.

(2) Both programs aim for a "1:1" mentoring relationship (i.e. one university student supporting individually one secondary student) and rely heavily on digital technologies that allow for synchronous video-communication. The

online component began as a communication imperative during the various lock-down phases of each country but has stabilized into a flexible communication model that facilitates university students continued participation (despite complex schedules and student mobilities), an individual organization with mentee students and an extended geographical outreach for the program (regional, in the case of Madrid, and national, in the case of Bucharest).

(3) Both programs have created a training and social support structure for university mentor students. These structures are different in each context and include both formal structures and more organic support practices. However, they have played a role in allowing students with very different backgrounds to participate in the program and, as we discuss below, have contributed to the sustained participation of university students in the mentoring activity

In addition, these three features justify an analysis of the experiences of university students in mentor programs from a Community of Practice (CoP) perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). At the very least, two aspects can be pointed out. First, as said, the program itself is a social organization (i.e. community) with various intertwined social roles and forms of mutual influence which are singled out and made meaningful by university students in distinct ways. Second, perhaps more importantly for our analysis, participation in the program involves transformations in university students' expectations and mentor identities.

Both of these aspects can be examined empirically drawing from university mentors' actual experiences and discourses. This report builds on the first materials generated in this part of the *E-Belong* project in which a mentor training guide was proposed and adapted for use across institutional contexts (and eventually produced in four languages: Spanish, English, Romanian and Greek). In the Fall of 2022 we conducted two online focus group (FG) discussion sessions with a combination of Madrid and Bucharest university mentor students. One session focused on newly enrolled university students in the program ('novices') and was attended by 10 university mentors. A second session focused on students who had been participating in the program for more than a year ('veterans') and was attended by 9 university mentors. Both FGs were co-led by a researcher from each university and supported by a coordinator of the Madrid program. The sessions were conducted in English (L2 for all participants) with support -when necessary- in the local languages (Spanish or Romanian) of the co-leaders.

In the following sections we build on thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) develop two lines of analysis around these discursive materials, which also allow for different types of comparisons within the data. First we examine the participation structures that are made available in these programs paying attention also to the motivations to participate in the program. This analysis is relatively horizontal,

combining the materials from both FG, but allows to examine potential cross-cultural differences in the discourses of mentor students. The second analysis is much more cross-sectional and focuses on differences and similarities in the discourses of novice and veteran mentors, which are taken as an indication of the impact of participation in the program (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2016).

The Social Infrastructures and Motivations to Participate in Outreach Programs

Figure 1 attempts to capture the social infrastructure created by the outreach program as described by the university mentor students. Building from the account of the students is the key feature of the analysis, as it allows us to examine how formal structures built into the design of each program are uptaken and interpreted by the students themselves. At the center of the system is the 1:1 mentoring relationship shared by both programs and in other aspects of the schematization the specificities of each site are also pointed out.

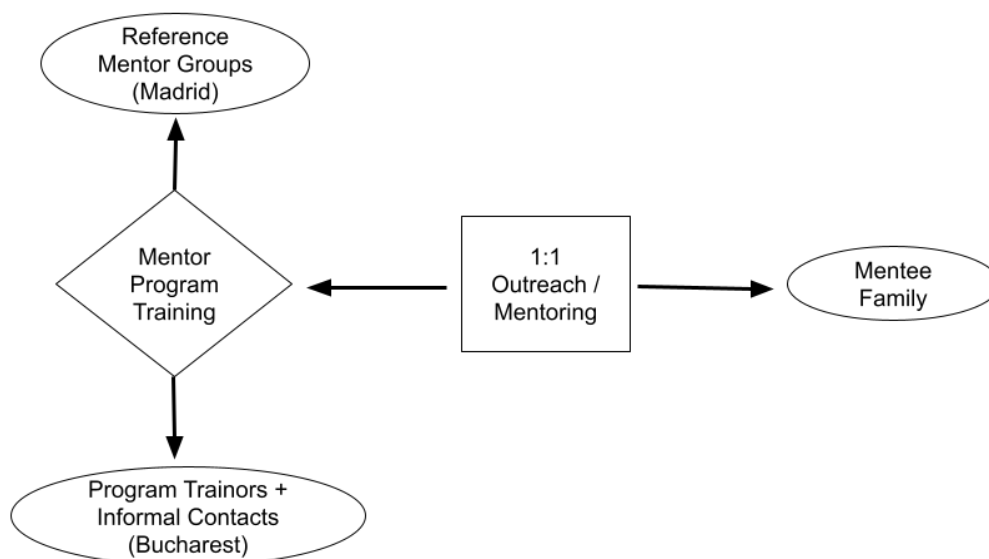


Figure 1

Social Structure of the University Outreach Programs (Madrid - Bucharest)

The shared elements in this schema are those positively valued by university students and which contribute to play a role in their continued engagement in the program. Yet, students in each institution single out certain aspects of their experience as especially relevant to them.

The Madrid program is built with a formal support structure in which student mentors are organized into small groups guided by a group coordinator and with multiple opportunities for peer exchange. This aspect is underscored both as a formal space for support in the mentoring work and an informal socialization space for university

students. As support space it is valued as a stimulating and socially diverse community:

Excerpt 1: Pedro¹ (University Student - Madrid - Novice)

The fact of working as a team, because normally, when we work as a team (..) the thought was "Uf!, I (don't) like doing work projects" like more in school, or in high school because it is just work and don't bond ... but in in this project we bond, we actually help each other in in our different teams, and we get more to know more about each other because we we help everyone with their students, and we propose techniques to help them. And we, as I said, we know more from each other. We are really diverse people (...)

In addition, the peer mentor groups may turn into a friendship space, which not only makes the experience run smoothly but also generates other forms of commitment and continuation in the program:

Excerpt 2: Alicia (University Student - Madrid - Veteran)

For me, for example, it was not just connecting with the kid but also the team, for me the team was a very, very important thing. I think I was very lucky with the team I was working with, and I really appreciated these meetings, I really liked meeting them. It was a very important moment for me in the week, meeting my colleagues (...) we were also connecting to each other, so it was not only about the mentoring, it was also about (...) relationships with each other, I also got a chance to get new friends. (...) So this was another motivation to continue this year, in order to find people so cool as the ones last year.

University students in Bucharest also value positively the support provided by the teachers and trainers in the programs and the opportunities they had to exchange experiences (in more informal ad-hoc created spaces, such as whatsapp groups). But when they turn to the more personally meaningful aspects of their experience, in this case, some students underscore the personal relationship with the "kid" they mentor and support. In this exchange, the relationship has a personal component and it becomes an opportunity for learning in both directions.

Excerpt 3: Bogdana and Anca (University Students - Bucarest - Novices)

B: My girl is enthusiast about everything, from nature to science, to pedagogy because she wants to be a teacher and I learn from her to be more enthusiast, and to be happier because she is and I am not always.
(...)

¹ We use pseudonyms for the participating studies. Apart from their time in the program, the only other personal information we gathered from participants was their course of study, manifested gender and age (when they chose to disclose it).

A: I learn from my kid to be more patient because I had really high expectations and I was very optimistic I thought "well, we are more or less the same age and we are going to get along well" but I don't say it's not the case, because she is very nice but she is very shy and I am very energetic and enthusiast and I have to learn to calm down and to give her space (...) I don't think we are in this program only to give, we also receive valuable lessons from them.

Figure 2 captures a thematic network of the motivations expressed by university students to participate in the program:

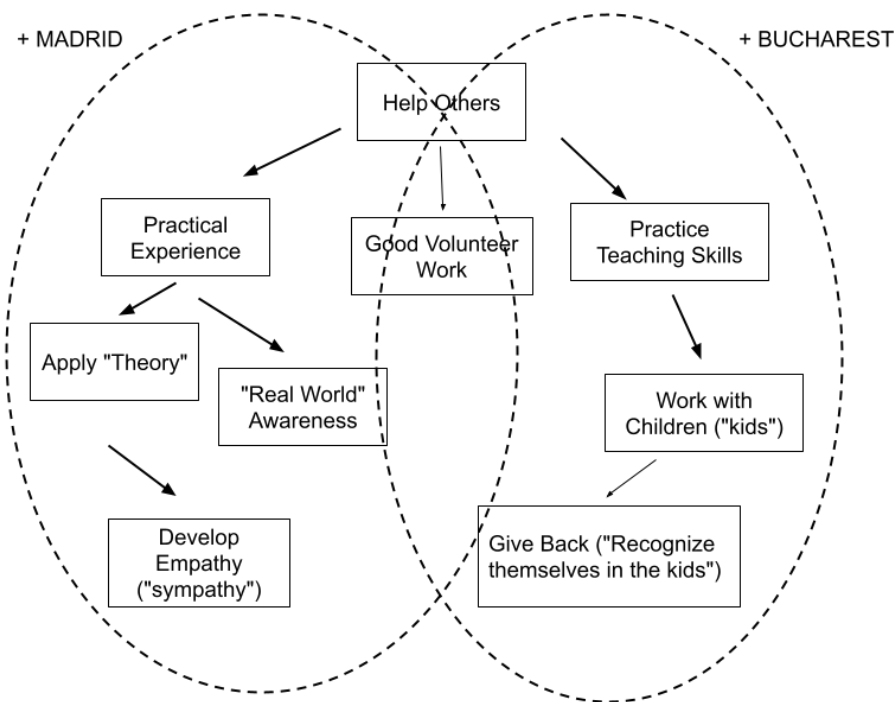


Figure 2
University Students' Motivations to Participate in the Mentoring Program

When asked about the reasons (motivations) to enroll in the outreach program offered at their institution both Madrid and Bucharest students express a variety of motivations. These reasons are identified by 'novice' and 'veteran' volunteers (and also shift through time as we examine in the next section) and have a specific realization in each context, which seems to be somewhat tied to the disciplinary background (or professional aspirations) of the university students. From this perspective an interconnected set of motivations emerge in university students:

(a) The starting point is the overarching goal of helping others and participating in a "volunteer" program. Within this general aspiration, the opportunity offered by the outreach program of their respective universities is a good practical choice.

(b) Participating in the program is also seen as an opportunity to gain practical experience and skills. For Madrid students, who come from a variety of courses of study and academic backgrounds, this is generally seen as a way of connecting the "theory" acquired in their studies with real "practice". For Bucharest students, who concentrated in Education-related courses of study, the outreach program is much more specifically interpreted as an opportunity to practice teaching skills.

(c) The theory-practice link is also intertwined with developing a broader awareness of the social world and social issues. When arguments turn to these ideas, more distinct differences emerge between Madrid and Bucharest university students. In Madrid, social awareness has a more generic framing as "real world" awareness and contributes to develop "empathy" (expressed generically, as a motivation and a learning experience):

Excerpt 4: Andrea (University Students - Madrid - Novice)

So the thing that I'm learning is to be more sympathetic to other people (...) I mean, we have to learn that everybody has different difficulties and different backgrounds, and we have to understand that maybe that's not the time, the moment or they have different issues (...) So that's why I'm learning that I have to be more sympathetic in that aspect (...)

In the case of Bucharest, "real world experience" is materialized much more specifically in (enjoying) working with kids. More significantly, a repeated motivation to participate in the program stated by Bucharest students builds on empathy but much more specifically connected to the life-stage of the students they mentor. Bucharest students remember and recognize the challenges and difficulties they experienced as teenagers / secondary education students, which is transformed into a specific (and powerful) motivation to participate in the program:

Excerpt 5: Iuliana (University Student - Bucharest - Veteran)

(...) I remember myself when I was 13-14 years old and how stressed I was, and I don't want anybody else to feel like I did. And I want to guide these kids, especially they don't have the opportunities that we had (...) so that's my motivation (...)

Transformations in the Identities and Relationships of University Mentors

The final part of the analysis of mentors' motivations suggests an interrelationship between motivations and their learning experiences in the program. This interconnection can be foregrounded through the comparison of the discourses of 'novice' and 'veteran' students participating in the outreach programs. In addition, examining the views of experienced university students in relation to their participation in the program provides some understanding of how commitment with the program is construed (and, therefore, could be better supported).

A visual device that helps represent the differences between novices and veterans is the "river of life" task participants were asked to complete during the focus group session. In this pedagogical activity, participants are asked to draw their life (or portion of their life) as "a journey through a river", with all the features that this path might have. In the FG session we asked students to draw their journey in the program, starting with the moment in which they decided to participate in the mentoring experience. Not unexpectedly, there are notable differences in the logic of the representations of each journey: while for novices it is more a representation of expectations and early experiences (particularly the "contact shock" with families and mentees), for veterans it is a retrospective account of the particular paths taken during their work with the kids.

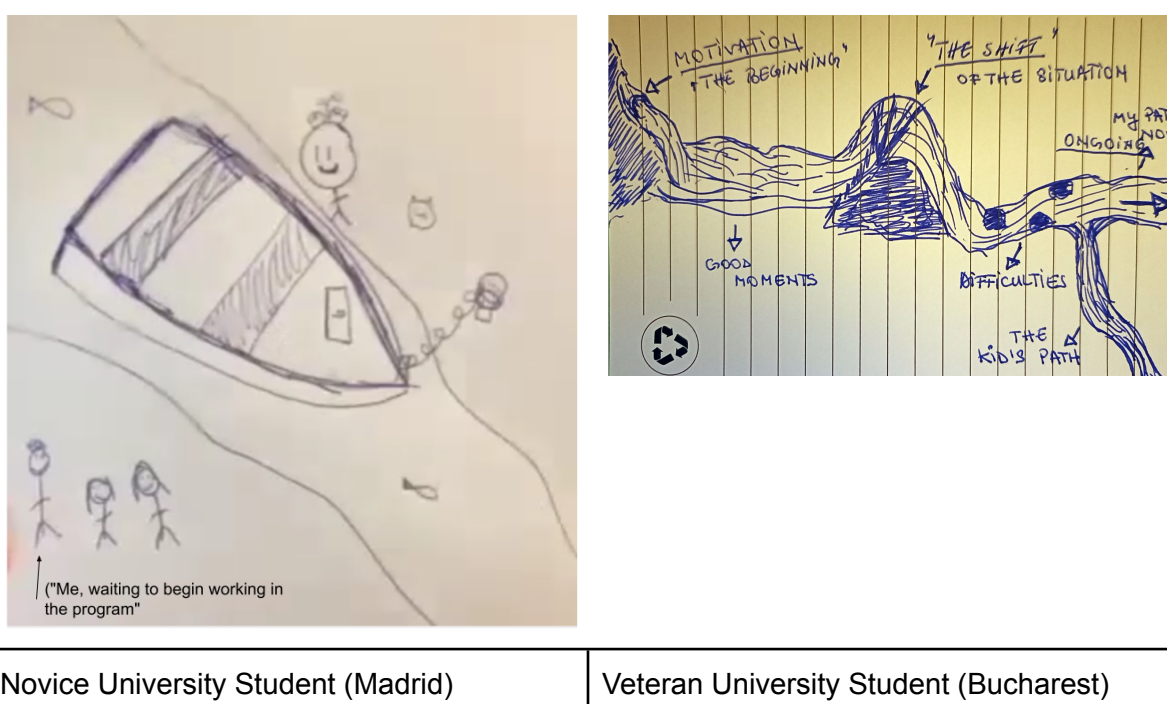


Figure 3 (a-b)

River Journeys of Novice (a) and Veteran (b) University Mentors

Precisely it is this transformation what we delve into in this section: the narrative behind the transformation from initial expectations and motivations to the shifts in decisions and commitment to continue participating in the program reported by 'veteran' mentors.

University students enter the program with a set of reasonable and instrumental motivations to participate in the program - or, in the case of Bucharest students, with a retrospective sense of the importance the support program might have for secondary education students in Romania. During their time in the program these initial motivations are confirmed through their mentoring experience (e.g. participating

in the program is good practical experience) but, more importantly, shift in another direction. In this shift personal commitment with the different actors involved in the program becomes a more powerful motivator and helps explain sustained involvement in the program (beyond university time units, such as a semester or academic year). Above we saw how, particularly for Madrid students, relationships with peers and other mentors in the program emerged as a positive aspect of the experience and incentive to continue participating in the program (Excerpt 2). Complementing this, the personal relationship with the families and kids they mentor feeds into a sense of responsibility to continue participating in the program. This sense of responsibility to their mentees, despite the organizational differences between programs and the contextual differences between Madrid and Bucharest, emerges in university students from both contexts:

Excerpt 6: Andrés (University Student - Madrid - Veteran)

When I was with families (...) when I was like supporting families, for me it was like you created a human connection, you create a relationship between you and the family. That is always going to be a motivation, at least for me. I think Blanca was the one who mentioned it, that she feels like that girl counts on her, so that happened to me, I felt those families were counting on me and I was supporting them. So it would be like abandoning them, abandoning the project would be abandoning people that I am supposed to be helping, that I care about (...)

Excerpt 7: Bianca (University Student - Bucharest - Veteran)

I also felt that I was no good for this project because the young lady that I am working with, she is very smart, she is very conscious about everything that she is doing and I wonder maybe I am not right and maybe I am not enough (...) but then I learned that sometimes the only thing that kids need, and people, humans, just need to be listened and doing this I started learning about her and how I could support her (...) and I also learned that what is keeping me to be part of this project is that what I am doing now will influence her maybe just a little bit. If I quit, maybe she will start wondering "why did I quit?, is she not good enough" and I don't want her to think this. So this is keeping me going forward, and forward and forward (...)

The emergence of this motivation also helps understand how students construe the support structures offered by each outreach program. While these become facilitators for their work, they are not seen as motivators in themselves to continue in the program (taking into account that peer mentor groups turn into a personal friendship space for Madrid students). In this context the affordances of digital communication technologies, which currently permit good video conferencing across devices, integrating different applications and tools to online mentoring, etc. make the online aspect of the outreach program to be valued positively. It facilitates sustaining their mentoring relationships across the complex time schedules of university students and kids and, as said, the increased mobility of university students.

Excerpt 8: Alicia (University Student - Madrid - Veteran)

In my case it made it (...) much easier for me to participate, for example last year because I have a very, very difficult schedule, so to have it online was, like, much easier because I didn't have to spend time, like, going anywhere (...). And, for example, this year I am still in the program and because it's online I can join the program this year because as I said I am not in Madrid anymore (...)

Some students who have worked face-to-face and online with the same families might point out some advantages to on-site communication, and some particularities to each medium, the university students in our FGs do not point out impediments to building a sense of community and (as we have seen) personal relationships through digital media.

Conclusions / Summary

The analysis of university mentor students' discourses, with the advantages of a cross-national and cross-sectional examination of student experiences, permits drawing some implications for the guiding concerns of the project: (a) how an outreach program contributes to build a community; (b) what personal transformations, in learning identity and sense of belonging, are experienced by mentors; (c) what affordances do participants attribute to digital technologies in connection to their support work.

The outreach program as a community of practice: University outreach programs are designed with a series of support structures for participating university mentor students. At the same time, outreach work involves building a network of relationships between the program, mentor students and the children and families who participate in the program. The two experiences we have examined have different institutional arrangements, resources and institutional histories but share (even if sometimes implicitly) an understanding of this effort as a type of ecology (Navarro and Tudge, 2022). As Figure 1 attempts to capture, the program rests on a series of relational systems, which are defined formally in the design of the program but are, then, appropriated by mentors and given particular meanings. These meanings are connected to community-building during their participation in the program.

Sense of belonging and learning identity transformations: Participating in an outreach program is a learning experience for university students. At a more instrumental level, which students acknowledge, it is an opportunity to connect "theory" -which is how university students construe what they are learning within their courses of study- with "practice" and develop efficient work skills. This connection is made more explicit by students who are pursuing degrees related to the work of the program (such as pedagogy, teacher training or psychology). Yet, not all university mentors, especially

in Madrid, come from these closely related disciplinary areas; so learning and transformation through the program is not necessarily defined in these terms. As shown above, becoming a mentor is also an opportunity to strengthen the capacity to commit with others, build interpersonal relationships and develop emotional-relational competencies (i.e. empathy).

Digital communication and digital mediation: The university outreach programs, to different degrees, we built relying heavily on digital communication technologies -particularly video-conferencing and related applications for online shared work- out of necessity. However, as the programs developed in a post-pandemic context (in which face-to-face work was possible or even sought out), this online component was strengthened and interpreted as having particular socio-educational potential in each context. In the case of Madrid, it has allowed for a digital multi-layered training and support structure for mentor students. In the case of Bucharest, it allowed the development of an outreach program with national coverage. More importantly, from the perspective of the mentor students, working online has made it practically possible to develop a sustained involvement in the program. Also, for university students working online with children and families is not seen as an impediment to develop strong working relationships and a successful one-to-one mentorship.

In short, the mentor programs have been successful in creating a support structure for primary and secondary education students and families while providing university students with valuable experiences and opportunities for personal and professional growth. The community of practice approach has proven to be effective in transforming the identities and relationships of the mentor students, while the use of digital technologies has facilitated the program's outreach and sustainability.

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