

The Effect of Mentors' Communication Styles on Mentees' Academic Performances

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Abstract

Interpersonal communication and communication openness are the two main communication styles in tertiary educational mentoring. Studies in tertiary student development program show that the capability of mentors to successfully practice these communication styles may contribute to an improvement in mentees' academic performance. However, not much is discussed specifically involving mentors role in communication styles which play an important role in predicting variables in the tertiary mentoring program models. As such, this study was conducted to analyse the connection between mentors' communication styles and academic performance. This study was implemented using self-report questionnaires collected from undergraduate students in tertiary educational institutions in Sarawak, Malaysia. The outcomes of SmartPLS path model analysis provided two significant results: firstly, interpersonal communication had a significant correlation with academic performance. Secondly, communication openness had a significant correlation with academic performance. To conclude, these findings indicate that the mentors' communication styles in mentoring programs act as important predictors of academic performance in the organisations in the study. The discussion, implications and conclusion to this study is provided at the end.

Keywords: Interpersonal communication, communication openness, academic

Performance, Mentors and Mentees

Mentoring is referred to as the behaviour to support and encourage people to organise their own learning which can maximizes their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be (Eric Parsloe, 1998). According to Western Civilization, the implementation of mentoring program is found in the epic “The Odyssey” written by Homer. Using this example, mentor is referred to as a more senior person who has great wisdom and is trustworthy; named after a fabled character in Homer’s the Odyssey who taught the title character’s son (mentee or protégé) lessons for handling a challenging lifestyle before he goes to fight in the Trojan war (Edlin & Haensly, 1985; Merriam, 1993; Ismail et al., 2005, 2011, 2012). Two important terms come to mind which are connected to mentoring which are mentor and mentee. A mentor is often described as a person with the ability to help the mentee find the right direction and develop solutions to career issues. The mentor provides the mentee with an opportunity to think about career options and progress. On the other hand, the mentee is commonly known as a person with the knowledge, skills, abilities and positive attitudes to archive the target; for example, students in the universities. The mentoring practice which is applied in the western history is an important and interesting issue to study among contemporary scholars in search of the contribution and role of mentoring programs which enhance the development and ability of individual and group to perform the job and duties and achieve organisational targets and objectives (Cummings & Worley, 2009; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006; Ismail et al., 2005, 2011, 2012).

As stated in mentoring program literature, the term of mentoring is referred to as a learning method to create openness and strong relationship between mentors (i.e., knowledgeable and experienced person) and mentee (i.e., less knowledgeable and experience person) as an instrument to develop the skills and capability of person in the organisation to carry out the responsibilities, new technique, and concerned about all aspects among the mentees (Cummings & Worley, 2009; Johnson et al., 1991; Long, 2002; Noe et al., 2002). There are two main practices in mentoring programmes which are formal (i.e., structured and organised relationship between mentor and mentee using standard norms, continuous action plans, time frame, and particular objectives) and informal relationship (i.e., specific demands, spontaneous and adhoc action). Based on this formal and informal mentoring programme literature, there are two effective communication styles which are often implemented by mentors and mentees: communication openness and interpersonal communication (Ismail et

al., 2012; Santos & Reigadas, 2005; Vieno et al., 2007). Communication openness is generally defined based on the willingness to communicate honestly with each other and to share feelings and thought openly with self-disclosure as an appropriate stimulus (De Vito, 2008). The ability to communicate openly is described as a high degree of information sharing in the organisation (Troy et al., 2001). This type of communication is viewed as the ability of mentors to deliver information about the duties, responsible, procedures, objective and advantages to mentees when involved in mentoring programs, as well as the mentors' openness and comfortable conversation with mentees about their academic progress and personal matters (Santos & Reigadas, 2005; Rayle et al., 2006; Vieno et al., 2007). In contrast, interpersonal communication is defined as the sharing of feelings, knowledge, thought, experiences between mentors and mentees about particular aspects of things (Cummings & Worley, 2009; Johnson et al., 1991; Long, 2002).

Recent studies among scholars in mentoring programs reveal that the capability to implement communication openness and interpersonal communication among mentors may enhance the mentees' achievement, specifically their academic performances (Ismail et al., 2005, 2011, 2012; Santos & Reigadas, 2005). In the present organisation, especially in higher learning institutions academic performance is often described using a persistent grade-point average and student or graduation rates (Granger, 1995; Levin & Levin, 1991; Santos & Reigadas, 2005). Many scholars think that the relationship among interpersonal communication and communication openness are distinct but contain strongly interrelated constructs. This situation motivates researchers to further examine and fill in the literature gap by measuring the nature of relationship between mentoring communication styles and academic performances.

Purpose of the Study

This study has two objectives: the first one is to examine the relationship between interpersonal communication and academic performance. The second objective is to examine the relationship between communication openness and academic performance.

The relationship between communication practices in mentoring programs and academic performance is consistent with the notion of psychology theory. As stated in relevant literature, Rogers' (1951) humanistic theory explains that a person needs comfort, openness, self-disclosure and a strong connection of empathy and an accepting environment to build self-confidence and develop his/her ability (Roger, 1951). While Erikson's

(1968)(1982) psychosocial development theory posits that identity and intimacy are important to contribute to a healthy development of the young adults' self and personalities (*e.g.*, self-image, sense of belonging, and social bonds) within the professional and personal stages. These theories have gained strong support from the research literature. For an example, several studies had been conducted to explore the mentoring activities using direct effect model within different samples, like the perception of 189 students in 9 departments at the University of California in Santa (Tennenbaum et al., 2001), the perception of 110 students in Canadian colleges (Bernier et al., 2005), and a study on 127 students at a Defence-based University in Malaysia (Ismail & Ridzwan, 2012). The findings from these studies prove that the ability of mentor to properly implement comfortable interpersonal communication and communication openness will help to increase a healthy environment and development of individuals. Consequently, it may lead to greater performance among the mentees in the academic aspect (Campbell & Campbell, 1997, Ismail et al., 2012; Santos & Reigadas, 2005). Based on this research literature, it was hypothesized that:

H1: Interpersonal communication is positively related to academic performance.

H2: Communication openness is positively related to academic performance.

Materials and Method

Cross-sectional method is used in this study as the main procedure to collect data because it is suitable for integrating data from mentoring program literature, pilot study and the actual survey. This technique is able to decrease inadequacy of the single method bias and increase the quality and accuracy of the data collected (Sekaran & Bougie, 2011; Zikmund, 2000). This present study was conducted in a higher learning institution in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. Due to confidential reasons, the name of the organisation used is kept anonymous. At the initial stage of data collection, the survey questionnaires were drafted based on the information gathered from the mentoring program literature. Next, the pilot study was implemented involving five senior students (2nd year and above) in public institutions and five senior students (2nd year and above) in private institutions to verify that all questions were important, relevant, clear and suitable for an actual study. Hence, a back-to-back translation technique was employed to translate the survey questionnaires into English and Malay languages for the purpose of enhancing the validity and ensuring the reliability of research outcomes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010; Zikmund, 2000).

The survey questionnaire consists two sections: first, interpersonal communication was measured using three items : (b) communication openness was measured using four items which were adapted from mentoring communication literature (Foxon, 1993; Ismail *et al.*, 2012; Santos & Reigadas, 2005; Sullivan, 2000; Yamnill & McLean, 2001; Young & Cates, 2005).The items used to measure interpersonal communication were explanation, approachable, and face-to-face communication. The items used to measure communication openness were clarity of mentoring objectives, inculcation of moral values, critical thinking, and problem solving procedure. The academic performance was measured using nine items which were adapted from academic performance related student development literature (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Irving *et al.*, 2012; Ismail *et al.*, 2012; Rayle *et al.*, 2006). The items used to measure academic performance were CGPA, study methods, and skills for answering tests /exams. All items used in the questionnaires were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree/dissatisfied” (1) to “strongly agree/satisfied” (7). Then, demographic variables were used as controlling variables as this study focused on the attitude of the undergraduate students.

A convenience sampling technique was employed to distribute 250 survey questionnaires to undergraduate students who were ready to participate in this study. As regards the constraints of the organization rule, this sampling technique was chosen because the list of students in the organisation was not available and the management in the organization did not allow the researchers to randomly select respondents for this study. From the questionnaires distributed, 196 usable questionnaires from the university were returned to the researchers, yielding 78.4 percent of usable response rate. The survey questionnaires were answered by the participants according to their consent on a voluntarily basis. The number of this sample exceeds the minimum sample of 30 participants as required by the probability sampling technique, indicating that it may be analysed using inferential statistics (Ismail *et al.*, 2012; Sekaran & Bougie, 2011; Zikmund, 2000). Smart PLS version 2.0 as recommended by Henseler *et al.*, (2009) was utilised to assess the validity and reliability of the measurement scales and to test the research hypotheses.

Findings

Table 1 shows the respondents’ characteristics. Most of the respondents were female (70.9 percent), their ages vary from 22 to 24 years (70.4 percent), the highest education level amongst the respondents was STPM level (51.0 percent), third year students comprising the

majority in the respondent group (68.9 percent), students achieving CGPA between 3.01 to 3.50 also comprising the majority amongst the respondents f (48.5 percent), and the majority of the respondents were students who were studying in a public institution of higher learning (85.7 percent).

Table 1: Respondents' Characteristics (n=196)

Respondents' Profile	Sub-Profile	Percentage
Gender	Male	29.1
	Female	70.9
Age	19 to 21 years old	25.0
	22 to 24 years old	70.4
	25 to 27 years old	4.6
The Highest Educational Level	SPM	6.1
	STPM	51.0
	Diploma	10.8
	Matriculation	32.1
Current Year of Study	Second Year	6.1
	Third Year	68.9
	Fourth Year	24.5
	Fifth Year	0.5
Academic Achievement	CGPA 2.01-2.50	5.6
	CGPA 2.51-3.00	34.7
	CGPA 3.01-3.50	48.5
	CGPA 3.51-4.00	11.2
Institution	Public Institutions of Higher Learning	85.7
	Private Institutions of Higher Learning	14.3

Note: *SPM/MCE* : *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia/ Malaysia Certificate of Education*
STPM : *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia/ Higher School Certificate*

The confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument. Table 2 shows the results of convergent and discriminant validity analyses. All constructs had the values of average variance extracted (AVE) larger than 0.5, indicating that the values met the acceptable standard of convergent validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). Besides that, all constructs had the values of AVE square root in diagonal greater than the squared correlation with other constructs in off diagonal, indicating that all constructs met the acceptable standard of discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2009; Yang, 2009).

Table 2: *The Results of Convergent and Discriminant Validity Analyses*

Variable	AVE	Interpersonal Communication	Communication Openness	Academic Performance
Interpersonal Communication	0.7849	0.8859		
Communication Openness	0.6738	0.6171	0.8209	
Academic Performance	0.6552	0.4532	0.4725	0.8094

Table 3 shows the factor loadings and cross loadings for different constructs. The correlation between items and factors had higher loadings than other items in the different constructs, and the loadings of variables were greater than 0.7 in their own constructs in the model are considered adequate (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). In sum, the validity of measurement model met the criteria.

Table 3: *The Results of Factor Loadings and Cross Loadings for Different Construct*

Construct / Item	Interpersonal Communication	Communication Openness	Academic Performance
<u>Interpersonal Communication</u>			
IC1	0.896535	0.547366	0.392404
IC2	0.852659	0.529664	0.345347
IC3	0.907713	0.562513	0.454529
<u>Communication Openness</u>			
CO1	0.569112	0.821463	0.353844
CO2	0.501975	0.860428	0.445879
CO3	0.490125	0.819366	0.401343
CO4	0.472847	0.780201	0.335435
<u>Job Performance</u>			
JP1	0.346231	0.373872	0.786686
JP2	0.419037	0.367019	0.756053
JP3	0.361772	0.351208	0.837350
JP4	0.354881	0.450662	0.835012
JP5	0.321229	0.326622	0.786846
JP6	0.387612	0.384734	0.822914
JP7	0.390410	0.396930	0.821485
JP8	0.319710	0.338558	0.780780
JP9	0.385420	0.429805	0.852485

Table 4 shows the outcomes of reliability analysis for the instrument. The values of composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha were greater than 0.8, indicating that the instrument used in this study had high internal consistency (Henseler *et al.*, 2009; Nunally & Benstein, 1994). These statistical analyses confirmed that the measurement scales met the acceptable standard of validity and reliability analyses as shown in Table 2.

Table 4: Composite Reliability and Cronbach’s Alpha

Construct	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha
Interpersonal Communication	0.916249	0.863704
Communication Openness	0.891923	0.839031
Academic Performance	0.944674	0.934005

Analysis of Constructs

Table 5 describes the mean values for the variables as between 5.3 and 5.9, showing that the levels of interpersonal communication, communication openness and academic performance range from high (4) to highest level (7). The correlation coefficients for the relationship between the independent variable (*i.e.*, interpersonal communication and communication openness) and the dependent variable (*i.e.*, academic performance) were less than 0.90, showing that the data was not affected by a serious collinearity problem (Hair *et al*, 2006).

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Analysis and Descriptive Statistics

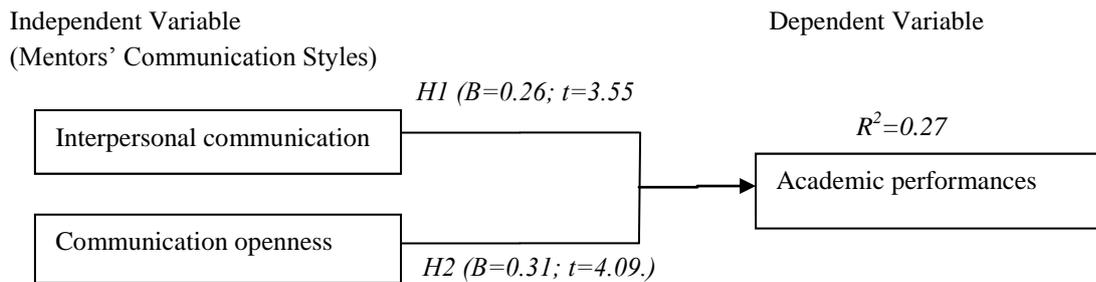
Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation analysis (r)		
			1	2	4
1. Interpersonal Communication	5.9	.85	1		
2. Communication Openness	5.4	.89	.62**	1	
3. Academic Performance	5.3	.83	.45**	.47**	1

Note: Significant at ** $p < 0.01$

Reliability Estimation is Shown in a Diagonal

Outcomes of Testing Hypotheses 1 and 2

Figure 2 shows the outcomes of SmartPLS path model for testing the direct effects model. In terms of the exploratory model, the inclusion of communication and support in the analysis explained 27 percent of the variance in dependent variable. Specifically, the results of the hypothesis testing highlighted two important results: first, interpersonal communication was significantly correlated with academic performance ($\beta=0.26$; $t=3.55$), therefore H1 was supported. Second, communication openness was significantly correlated with academic performance ($\beta=0.31$; $t=4.09$), therefore H2 was supported. To sum up, the result confirms that the mentoring programme also contributed as a significant determinant of the mentees’ academic performance in the organisational sample.



Note: Significant at $t > 1.96$

Figure 2: *The Outcomes of Smart PLS Path Model*

In order to determine a global fit PLS path model, a global fit measure (GoF) was conducted based on Wetzels *et al.*, (2009) guideline as follows: $GoF = \sqrt{\text{MEAN}(\text{Communality of Endogenous}) \times \text{MEAN}(R^2)} = 0.75$, signifying that it exceeds the cut-off value of 0.36 for large effect sizes of R^2 . This result confirms that the PLS path model had better explaining power as compared to the baseline values (GoF small=0.1, GoF medium=0.25, GoF large=0.36). This also provides strong support to validate the PLS model globally (Wetzel *et al.*, 2009).

Discussion and Implications

The findings prove that mentors' communication styles are important predictors of academic performance in the organisation in this study. Regarding the scope of this study, a majority of the mentees perceived that levels of communication openness, interpersonal communication and academic performance are strongly practised in the organisation. Therefore, the capability of mentors to appropriately implement interpersonal communication and communication openness in formal and /or informal mentoring activities has increased mentees' academic performance in the mentioned organisation.

This study has achieved three major findings: theoretical contribution, robustness of research methodology and practical contribution. In the aspect of theoretical contribution, the findings of this study show that mentors' communication styles (*i.e.*, interpersonal communication and communication openness) are important predictors of academic performance. This outcome is also supported by studies conducted by Campbell and Campbell (1997), Santos and Reigadas (2002), and Ismail *et al.*, (2012).

As regards the robustness of research methodology, the survey questionnaires utilised for this research are supported by the valid and reliable acceptable standards of analyses. The practical contributions or outcomes from this study can be implemented to increase the

effectiveness of mentoring programs among the management and undergraduates in higher learning institutions. The objective may be successfully achieved if the management provides more attention for the selected aspects: firstly, mentors should learn to improve their learning strategy by using more interesting tools and attractive activities compared to giving lectures to stimulate mentees to contribute their thoughts, ideas and knowledge and as an incentive for them to actively follow these mentoring programmes. Secondly, mentors require training with an updated andragogy method to increase their experience and knowledge in various types of teaching and guiding students. Thirdly, mentees have to be grouped into selected components according to their performance and academic achievement so that mentors can fulfill the needs and expectations suitable with the mentees' levels. Finally, the learning process and strategy should be diversified to entertain and attract the mentees to remain continuously committed with the mentoring programmes. If these suggestions are taken into consideration, this may motivate students to improve their academic performances.

Conclusion

This study forms a conceptual framework based on the mentoring program research literature. The results from the confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that the measurement scale used in this study met the standards of acceptable validity and reliability analyses. The results of Smart PLS path model analysis showed two important findings: firstly, interpersonal communication was positively and significantly correlated with academic performance, thus the H1 was supported. Secondly, communication openness was positively and significantly correlated with academic performance, therefore H2 was supported. Furthermore, the results also support the extended mentoring program literature published in Western countries. Additionally, present research and practice within the student development program require implementing interpersonal communications and communication openness as key components for the undergraduate mentoring program domain. Another suggestion that should be applied is the role of mentors to properly implement interpersonal communications and communication openness which may contribute and increase subsequent positive mentee outcomes (e.g., motivation to learn, self-efficacy, psychosocial, career, leadership and ethics). Therefore, the benefits and outcomes may help to maintain and achieve the higher learning institutions' vision, mission and goals.

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