

Peer Support: Development of peer support initiatives to fit a changing student agenda

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Abstract

Studies into the first year experience have consistently highlighted the importance of Peer Support for students; but what does this really mean and how is this best managed and implemented in practice?

Following the adoption of the U. S. Supplemental Instruction model of Peer Assisted learning, Kingston University in England has developed and adapted some of the ways in which it uses students to support one another to maximise the benefits in particular settings. These include schemes involving first year students working together to support one another; second year students mentoring first years; and third year students running seminars for first years.

The paper illustrates how evaluations through focus groups, questionnaires and attendance and performance data have enabled us to start to uncover some of the underlying issues for students; to identify the extent to which this type of support is being used to help them in a range of ways, including the development of team working skills, taking control of their learning, building social networks and confidence; and to plan further peer support developments. The demands of the curriculum along with pedagogic and policy implications is also discussed.

Introduction

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is an adaptation of the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model first piloted in the US in 1973 (Martin 1983). Despite a number of qualitative and quantitative research studies undertaken (Capstick 2004; Rust & Wallace 1993) that have found PAL to be effective in the UK, programmes have provoked some debate about the role of student initiative and ownership in what traditionally remains a lecturer-dominated system (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997a; 1997b).

In the early 1990s Kingston University was one of the first universities in the UK to implement PAL, with Jenny Wallace, now at London Metropolitan University, playing a central role in advocating the desirability of such additional support to the student learning experience and in helping to implement schemes here. This paper goes on through series of case studies to highlight the diverse ways in which peer support has subsequently been adapted to meet the needs of particular groups of students and staff at Kingston University.

Case study 1 - Physiotherapy

The physiotherapy teaching team are mindful that Physiotherapists often work with one another or with other members of the multidisciplinary team and need to be able to communicate, plan and execute many tasks together. In addition, having noted the prevalence of a predominantly competitive culture among first year physiotherapy students from an early stage, they introduced a same year peer support scheme designed to address these issues.

First year students were given an introductory lecture to the scheme which covered guidance on selecting topics for discussion and methods for running the sessions and emphasised the importance of role selection and rotation of responsibilities and respect for other members of the group. The year group (n=72) was divided into groups of 8-10 students which met weekly for one hour, each electing a chairperson and scribe for each session. It was envisaged that, students would feel more comfortable discussing aspects of the course work that were challenging to them without the presence of a tutor. The sessions also aimed to provide students with the opportunity to develop team working skills consistent with employability requirements (Hammond 2006).

To evaluate the effectiveness of this scheme questionnaires were completed by attending students to gauge their experience and focus groups carried out with teaching staff and students, from one group not deemed to be functioning well and one which clearly was functioning well, to allow comparisons of experience and perceptions.

Figure 1 shows that the students responded favourably to the social aspects of the peer learning sessions such as: "obtaining other peoples' perspectives", "learning with others" and "opportunity to air concerns away from teaching staff". The sessions have possibly provided an opportunity to sound out ideas away from the lecturers without fear of the embarrassment that is common when trying to learn from/with an expert (Baldry-Currens 2003). Although it may be that students have many opportunities to discuss topics in an informal way outside classes, the support sessions may be a valuable way of formalising this communication process and effectively "allowing" students to learn together.

Supported by peer learning?

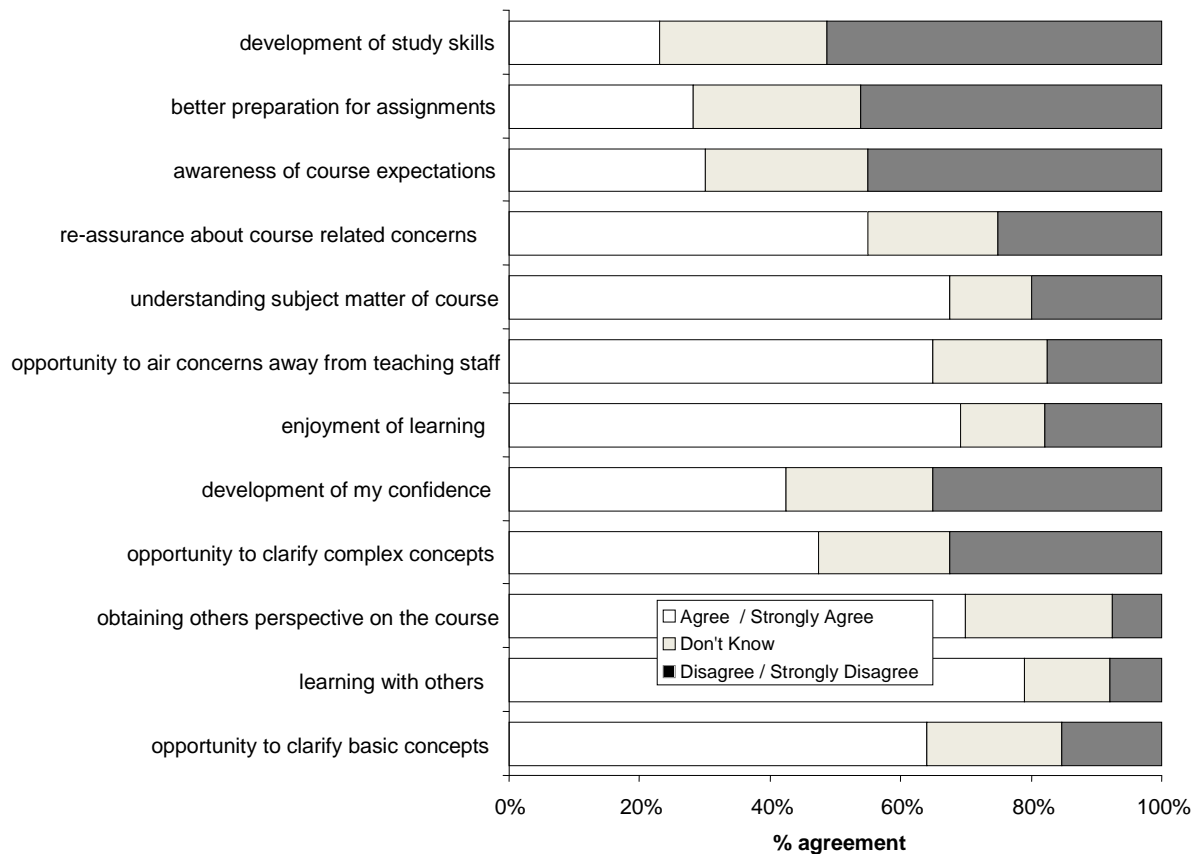


Figure 1

Figure 2 shows the emergent themes from focus groups with staff and students; it is interesting to note the high level of agreement between them, in particular that of the importance of getting students into appropriately balanced groups that then provided ongoing monitoring and support.

Theme	Staff (n=3)	Contented students (n=5)	Discontented students (n=4)
The make-up of the student groups.	“Some groups worked well because the mix of students gelled”.	“Your allocated group seems to be the luck of the draw... tutors should check whether they are working”. “The session aided learning...we bounced ideas off each other” [It is important to have] “the right mix of individuals including natural leaders”	“Our group didn’t work...I was jealous of how successful other groups were” “Tutor allocated groups were a problem”
The previous educational experience and commitment	[An issue is] “the importance of student background. E.g. Access students more used to collaboration”.		“Students not preparing for the sessions is a problem”
Communication and organisation	“Improved communication could help dysfunctional groups at an early stage”	[The session give you a] “chance to have your say”	“There is insufficient input from staff....More guidance and structure was needed” “There was a lack of monitoring by staff ... The tutor should sometimes to see how it is going”

Figure 2

Case study 2 - English Literature

The department of English Literature at Kingston University has developed a peer support programme with the aim of enabling first-year students to increase their academic reading and writing skills related to a specific level-one module through the use of level-three students facilitating timetabled level-one seminars.

The programme was designed to encourage level-one students to take ownership of their learning by providing a non-threatening environment where they could make mistakes and ask difficult questions. In addition by providing a student facilitator who could model the behaviours of a successful student (rather than a lecturer who is expected to have answers) they hoped to facilitate workshops that would enable students to become better readers and editors of their own writing and that of others. They also hoped to encourage level-one students to feel involved in their course through the development of a peer study group. (Longfellow 2006)

The extent to which the aims of the scheme were met was gauged through satisfaction questionnaires; module evaluation forms, which yielded qualitative data on the students’ experiences; and analysis of assessment results.

From a total population of 117 level-one students 59 attended the support sessions and completed the questionnaires. The results in Figure 3 show a high level of satisfaction with the peer support scheme and indicate that students were finding them worthwhile

Questionnaire Statements	In agreement
I spoke up and asked questions in the peer support sessions	85%
The materials we used in the lectures were helpful	70%
Attending the lecture/workshop sessions was worthwhile	70%
My peer support leader was well-prepared	63%
Attending the peer support sessions helped me to understand the lectures	60%
Overall peer support sessions were helpful or very helpful	55%

Figure 3

Thematic analysis of the module evaluation question ‘In what ways did you benefit from your peer support sessions?’ drew out the underlying issues for these students as shown in Figure 4

Theme	Student perspective
Clarification of new knowledge.	<p>“Things were explained in a much simpler and interesting way than in the lecture.”</p> <p>“...someone to talk to when things got a little confusing.”</p>
Making assessment easier/developing assessment skills	<p>“...with the help of the peer support leader, I managed the assessment well.”</p> <p>“I received good tips on writing theses statements and essays.”</p>
Reduction in feelings of intimidation	<p>“It was good to chat to someone who has recently dealt with similar difficulties in this subject.”</p> <p>“I didn’t feel like I was being looked down on if I said something stupid.”</p>
The Safe environment created by the small group	<p>“The sessions were helpful as we could go over the coursework in smaller and manageable groups.”</p> <p>“Lots of advice, countless cups of tea, use of a table on a Tuesday afternoon...and someone to talk to.”</p>

Figure 4

To investigate whether the scheme was enabling students to improve their academic skills we compared the change in assessment scores between modules in the first and second semesters (Aspects of English 1 and II) for those students who had attended the peer support seminars and those who had not. We chose this method rather than analysing the absolute assessment scores in order to minimise bias from variations in the prior learning of students, and found that all students (whether they attended the support sessions or not) tended to get lower assessment scores in the second semester module than they had received in the first. However, the mean decrease was significantly greater for those students who had not attended. In other words, students who had attended the peer support seminars did better than those who had not. These results are shown in Figure 5.

	Change in aggregate assessment scores of student undertaking modules Aspects of English I and Aspects of English II	
Summary Statistics	Non attendees	Attendees
Mean	-11.5	-5.1
Median	-11	-3
Standard Deviation	11.2	10.3
Count	58	59

Figure 5

Case study 3 - Surveying

One of the longest running of peer support schemes across the university has been with Surveying students. In this scheme second year mentors are paid to work closely with groups of first year students. The aim is to provide support and advice for students in problem solving and carrying out assignments and to help develop the organisation and leadership skills of the leaders (Smith 2003).

The timetabled sessions provide practice in problem solving in a supportive and informal environment. This is designed to enable first year students to gain confidence in their own ability to work on and solve problems, to develop greater understanding of course content and to take greater responsibility for their learning. Second year students who have successfully completed the first year of the same course are selected to run the weekly sessions because of their awareness of the difficulties and challenges of the course.

The leaders run one-hour timetabled weekly sessions, take a register of attendance, which is voluntary, and report to the support tutor either verbally or by writing a weekly report highlighting issues, problems and concerns raised by the first year students.

Evaluation of the scheme has been through questionnaires and focus groups with mentees and individual interviews with session leaders. The questionnaires, given to all first year Surveying students showed that only about a quarter had attended any sessions. The reasons given for not choosing to attend were, in most cases, either that there was no perceived need or that the times of the session were inconvenient. Those who attended reported the main benefits to be increased awareness of course expectations, obtaining perspectives of second year student, having the opportunity to clarify basic concepts, and feeling able to air concerns away from teaching staff.

The main findings from the focus groups and interviews shown in Figure 6 reveal that the mentees and the leaders were in fact benefiting in a range of ways and that the scheme was largely meeting and indeed going beyond its aims.

Mentee themes	Mentees (focus groups)	Leader themes	Leaders (interviews)
Building relationships	<p>One benefit of Pal was felt to be in developing relationships. Students spoke of continuing relationships outside organised PAL sessions with some students.</p> <p>PAL can add to the student experience in other ways. "One guy used to come back every week, he just needed a friend" "Other people did as well"</p>	Enhancing experience through networking	<p>"Meeting more people was very useful"</p> <p>"I got the opportunity to meet students from other levels which wouldn't have happened otherwise since we have no social events in our school"</p>
Additional learning from peers	<p>"It's easier to learn from someone who's had to work it out for themselves"</p> <p>"The mentors seem to help to contextualise learning: the lecturers say 'you'll understand it at the end of the course' but the mentors give more information"</p>	Experience of tutoring	<p>"Losing students throughout the year and them not playing an active role was quite disappointing"</p> <p>"The first year is extremely difficult and having the opportunity to get help is invaluable"</p> <p>"Best feature – "seeing students' anxiety dissipate throughout a session"</p> <p>"The best thing was awareness of different levels of understanding being developed among first years"</p> <p>"It increased my self confidence"</p>
Unofficial information	<p>PAL sessions are valuable for tips on time management because the mentors are more credible than the lecturers concerning the how long work will take.</p> <p>Unofficial knowledge e.g. "Which books are worth buying"</p>		

Figure 6

The sessions were clearly providing support to and enhancing the experience of both the first year mentees and the second year leaders. Perhaps the main issue for the faculty here is one of how to ensure that all students who could benefit find a way to take advantage of the support.

Discussion

From the findings it is clear that the actual make up of pre-selected groups plays an important part in their effectiveness. Some worked more productively and cooperatively than others and this was attributed to the characteristics of the group members. Reasons for poor outcomes from other groupings included references to the lack of commitment to a shared aim largely as a result of poor motivation. Group commitment was considered to be an important factor in sustaining cohesion, maintaining momentum and achieving results. The extent to which the course tutor provided support for example through timely or regular intervention was another contributory factor to the success or otherwise of the group output. Where successful, groups enabled communities of interest to emerge within which relationships developed thus enhancing the first year experience.

Students confirmed that the peer learning sessions were contextualised in ways that hadn't been experienced elsewhere. The chance to actively contribute to discussion, to ask questions, as well as the opportunity to make mistakes in a safe environment was considered to be an advantage. They were able to share understanding and in some instances to access knowledge about operational insights of the course, from those more experienced than themselves. As a result of this kind of experience, self confidence was developed in study and interpersonal skills as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Student leaders providing guidance considered the personal benefits of their role to have included an opportunity to meet and help a wide range of their peers, to consolidate and refresh their own knowledge of the subject matter and increased self confidence. They spoke of a sense of gratification on witnessing students' development as a result of their discussions and activities.

Staff responsible for managing this kind of support were aware that the profile of the group could determine its success and that the previous educational background of students should be considered when allocating them to groups. It was acknowledged that this kind of experience had the potential to develop key group communication skills.

A number of practice points emerge from the findings:

- The timetabling of sessions, whether they are group or individual drop in type surgery sessions, is crucial and problematic.
- Institutional support is essential in terms of making provision within course timetables for convenient meeting slots and providing appropriate rooming.
- Groups and surgery sessions require monitoring.
- The level of support for different activities will vary.
- Support is key to success.

The benefits and issues raised for this kind of support are being widely disseminated across the institution to encourage greater take up and the sharing of good practice across disciplines.

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