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Peer Assisted Learning Project

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1. Peer Assisted Learning Project

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Abstract

This report provides a comprehensive outline of the context for the Peer Assisted Learning Project and the process of implementation in the BA (Hons) International Business and Languages in the academic year 2009–2010. It also includes a set of recommendations arising from the project and it concludes with an outline for future work in the area.

Keywords: curriculum development, first year curriculum, Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), student engagement and retention

Outline of Fellowship Project

Introduction

The aim of this project was to enhance the learning experience of Year 1 students in the BA (Hons) International Business and Languages. Many students in their first year at 3rd level find it difficult to integrate in and cope with what is a very different learning environment to that experienced at secondary school. The BA (Hons) in International Business and Languages is challenging and demands much of the first year student. Year 1 students often lack both the study skills and the personal skills necessary to succeed in this new learning environment. Oftentimes there is no overt effort to address these possible deficits through the learning objectives of Year 1 modules. As a result students may be left in a vulnerable situation that can lead to an increasing level of disengagement with particular modules or the programme as a whole. This in turn may result in high attrition rates.

Research at DIT level has shown a substantial decrease year on year on failure rate levels and attrition from Year 2 onwards. It has also shown significant levels of failure rates and its associated corollary: attrition in Year 1 of all programmes across the Institute. A similar picture emerges for the BA International Business and Languages. Failure rate and attrition is considerable in Year 1 of the programme but it decreases thereafter. From Year 2 onwards failure rates decrease and few students leave the programme. Furthermore, final year students' academic performance is regularly acknowledged by the external examiners to be on a par with that of students in other institutions. This would suggest that those who have managed to progress to Year 2 are equipped with a skills set that is essential for academic survival.

The aim for the Peer Assisted Learning Project was to support Year 1 students and assist them with the academic challenges they face in their first year in college. In order to enhance Year 1 students' learning and social experience a variety of issues need to be addressed. Issues such as integration into college life and engagement with the new academic environment in general and with the programme in particular are key for a positive experience. The involvement and support of Year 2 students was sought as it was considered that they were ideally suited to aid Year 1 students navigate their way through the first year of the course.

The concept for Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) or Peer Assisted Support is for Year 2 tutors to provide

friendly, informal and effective support to their peers in Year 1. The nature of the support was to be negotiated and agreed between tutor and tutee/s so that it could be better directed to the areas in need of development; be it academic skills or indeed abilities of a more personal and social nature. The latter are often difficult to identify but play a crucial role in the overall academic experience of Year 1 students. As outlined in the next section, research has demonstrated that a positive experience of first year is directly linked to enhanced academic performance and improved retention rates both of which are the principal expected outcomes of this project.

Definition and Features of PAL

The Peer Assisted Learning Project carried out for the BA (Hons) International Business and Languages fits well with the following definition: 'PAL may be defined as a scheme for learning support and enhancement that enables students to work co-operatively under the guidance of students from the year above' (Capstick, Fleming & Hurne, 2004).

In practical terms, the experienced student, most usually, second year student (PAL tutors) support the learning experience of less experienced students, typically first-years. A PAL tutor or a pair of PAL tutors are matched with small groups of students and meet on a regular basis for informal, flexible study support sessions in a friendly and collaborative atmosphere. PAL tutors are expected to manage discussions and suggest activities focused on matters particular to the students' course of study. This may include discussion of class material, clarification on course direction and expectations, development of good study habits and strategies for learning, discussion around non-course-related discussion such as adjusting to university life. The emphasis is on guided group discussion and active learning based on the group's needs. Therefore PAL tutors are trained in study techniques, group management and facilitation skills (Capstick & Fleming, 2001; Ashwin, 2002; Jacobs & Hurley, 2008).

Historical Background and Terminology

PAL has its origins in an approach developed in the University of Missouri in the 1970s. In the USA, it has since been referred to as Supplemental Instruction (SI). SI programmes have been implemented across the USA and their effectiveness has been recognised by the US Department of Education. Terminology referring to PAL varies. In the USA it is called Supplemental Instruction and in Australia and New Zealand it is known as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). In effect, while universities have developed distinctive approaches to suit local conditions (Capstick & Fleming, 2001), the guiding principles of SI, PASS and PAL study sessions are all similar (Van der Meer & Scotty, 2009).

Theoretical Background

PAL strategies are underpinned by constructivist learning theories (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Vygotsky, 1978). These theories focus on 'the cognitive development of students in which learning is constructed in an interactive social context (peer collaborative learning)' (Jacobs, Hurley & Unite, 2008: 6). In Congos & Schoeps' view (1998: 52), PAL students 'collaborate to supply missing information or attempt solutions to problems as they help each other'. Therefore, at the heart of learning lie the interactions between teachers and students and between students themselves. These interactions, referred to by Johnson & Johnson (1989) as 'promotive interaction' result in learning as students encourage and facilitate each other's efforts to reach the group's goals. Thus collaborative learning produces higher achievement than competitive or individual effort. Constructivist learning theories suggest that students who collaborate with their peers and take an active approach to their learning not only earn higher grades but also have a stronger ground up understanding of course material (Arendale, 2005). The processes that emerge from these theories are fundamental elements to be included in PAL tutors' training so that tutors will be equipped to

conduct effective PAL sessions (Jacobs & Hurley, 2008).

Objectives

Common objectives of PAL strategies are to improve student learning, support the first year student experience by helping them to integrate into university life, raise student grades and achieve lower attrition rate (Jacobs & Hurley, 2008; Van der Meer and Scotty, 2009). While the former are of direct interest to students, the latter is of particular interest at institutional level (James, 2001; Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Krause, 2006). Also of great institutional interest during the last decade is the concept of student engagement. By getting involved in PAL initiatives, students demonstrate a greater engagement in academic activities that are or are not directly related to course work (Prebble et al., 2004). This is also true for PAL leaders who find their overall learning experience enhanced (Topping & Ehly, 1998).

Effectiveness

Much of the literature reports on the effectiveness of PAL/PASS and more particularly of SI initiatives (McCarthy, Smuts & Cosser, 1997) whose efficacy at raising student grades, lowering failure rates and improving retention rates has long been recognised by the US Department of Education (Congos & Schoeps, 2003; Jacobs & Stone, 2008; Van der Meer & Scotty, 2009). Furthermore, research has shown that these academic support programmes enable the development of transferable skills both within and outside the academic context (Koehler, 1995; Price & Rust, 1995; Congos & Schoeps, 1998; Donelan, 1999).

Outline of Fellowship Initiative

The PAL initiative was first presented to the International Business and Languages programme teaching team during the School Meeting at the start of the academic year.

First year students were informed about the scope of the project during the International Business and Languages Induction Session in September 2009. This was followed by an email from the project coordinators outlining the potential benefits both of the initiative and their participation in the project. Year 2 students of all language streams were first emailed to encourage them to volunteer as tutors. This was followed by in class presentations which briefly outlined the role of the tutor in the initiative and associated benefits to volunteers. While project coordinators had felt this could perhaps be the biggest hurdle in the setting up phase of the project, Year 2 students displayed a very positive attitude towards the project and were eager to participate and become tutors. A list of Year 2 students volunteering to become tutors was compiled at the end of these in-class presentations.

In parallel to this, project coordinators were kindly invited to participate and sit in at the training session for PAL tutors held by the Department of Languages and Literary Studies in Trinity College Dublin. This training session provided the backbone and the foundation for the training sessions organised for the Induction session for IBL tutors a week later. The content for the induction session for Year 2 volunteers centered on the following points:

- Outline of objectives and benefits of PAL
- General guidelines about the role of the tutors
- Exploration of the concept of tutor as facilitator of learning
- Reflection on the concept of collaborative learning and its role in PAL sessions
- Interaction and scope of PAL sessions

The format for the Induction Session used a variety of techniques to elicit participation and

interaction amongst volunteers. It also aimed to provide volunteers with a model of what a PAL session should be like. At the end of the training session tutors were provided with the *Tutor's Handbook*. This Handbook contains useful information and general guidelines to aid tutors in their new role. The Handbook also includes feedback forms so that tutors can keep a log of meetings with tutees and the nature of activities undertaken during each session.

The Induction Session for Year 2 volunteers was offered on three different dates so that all volunteers could be trained.

Review week was identified as the ideal time for an informal get-together session between trained tutors and interested Year 1 students. The session was particularly well attended by tutors and it was used to pair tutors and Year 1 students. During this session mentors were paired off with tutees based on their respective language streams and their personal affinities. During the session it was emphasised that it was now up to the individual tutors and tutees to arrange weekly meetings, to decide on the range of activities and the type of support required to effectively guide and support Year 1 students.

Just before Christmas, a feedback questionnaire was sent out to both tutees and tutors with the objective of assessing the Initiative's roll out and identifying groups actively engaged in PAL, the frequency of PAL meetings, the issues encountered and the topics discussed during PAL sessions. As illustrated in the chart below, some attrition was noted, particularly in the French and Spanish streams. The German and English streams generally showed more commitment to the initiative.

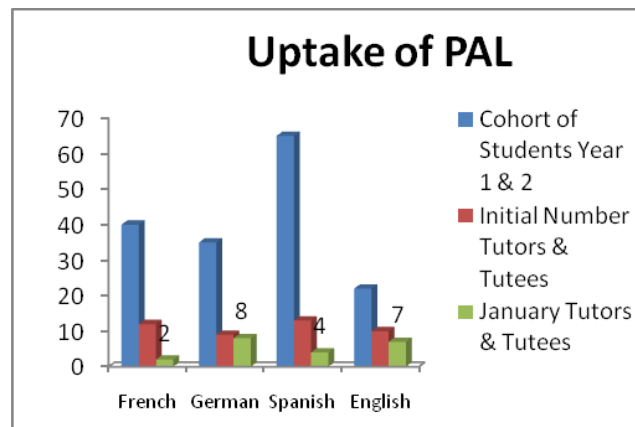


Table 1.1: Uptake of Peer Assisted Learning 2009–2010

In view of the survey findings it was decided to re-launch the initiative in Semester 2. In order to re-launch the project and attract more Year 1 students to become fully involved in the PAL sessions a series of steps were taken including the re-activation of a Facebook account for the project; the creation of a flyer to be displayed on Year 1 notice boards and distributed to Year 1 students in class; messages were also sent to Year 1 students' mobiles with information about PAL. Finally, Year 2 tutors volunteered to present the PAL initiative and its benefits to Year 1 students during class time thus hoping to engage first year students with their enthusiasm.

Recommendations from Peer Assisted Learning Teaching Fellowship

It is important to evaluate any PAL initiative from different perspectives in order to identify areas for improvement and enhance its implementation (Van der Meer & Scotty, 2009). In this section, the

perspectives considered will be that of the first year students, the second year tutors, the trainers, the staff and the institution. For each, some recommendations will follow a number of reflections.

First Year Students

Involvement in the Peer Assisted Learning Initiative has brought to light many issues relating to the experience of students in their first year in college. One of the most salient and recurrent issues throughout the duration of the initiative was the difficulty of establishing and maintaining a 'connection' with Year 1 students. The success of any project carried out in their interest can only be achieved if what makes them 'tick' is clearly identified and steps are taken to build on it. Research indicates that students enrol to improve their grades in the course (Van der Meer & Scotty, 2009). However, the uptake by first year students in the PAL initiative was unexpectedly low, attendance to meetings was inconsistent and tutors found it difficult to successfully engage Year 1 students. It would appear that there are other factors at stake that motivate or de-motivate students. The difficulties encountered may be a result of first year students' 'inappropriate expectations' (Capstick & al., 2004: 32), an aspect worthy of further investigation. Nonetheless there were some noteworthy examples of the positive impact the PAL Initiative had on a small number of Year 1 students. These students reported that their tutors had provided them with a much needed lifeline at various junctures during the year. These students found the support of the tutors invaluable in areas such as understanding the nature of assignments, lecturers' expectations in relation to written and oral assessments and preparation for exams. On reflection, this initiative worked very well for a small number but it failed to engage all Year 1 students. This was due to a variety of factors.

Second Year Tutors

Tutors were pleased with the outcomes of their PAL experience even though many of them would have liked to have seen a greater uptake among first year students. As suggested by the literature (Topping & Ehly, 1998), tutors acquired a transferable set of skills which they had not developed through their normal class work. They also became more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. At an end of year meeting with tutors and tutees, tutors made special reference to their increased sense of confidence, the development of inter-personal skills and communication capability. Tutors' overall experience of their involvement in the initiative was one of achievement and accomplishment.

As a means to further capitalise on the tutors' learning, it is hoped that upon the validation of an extra-curricular activities module PAL tutors will have the option to complete this module in the form of a CPD course. Much of its content would cover similar skills to those necessary in the facilitation of PAL sessions. This module is to be validated shortly. Its aim would be twofold: to provide students with ongoing support in their PAL sessions as well as awarding them a certification recognisable by employers.

Trainers

The project leaders provided some basic training to the second year tutors based on the training of tutors observed in Trinity College and a review of the literature. In hindsight, the trainers' understanding of PAL methodology needed to be developed further to meet the many challenges encountered. Indeed, adequate training of project coordinators is essential for the successful running of a PAL scheme (Capstick & Fleming, 2001) as 'it is not enough to assume that because PAL is supposed to be cooperative, that in reality it will always operate in this way' (Ibid.: 72). Therefore, it will be important for the subsequent running of PAL programmes on this BA to provide trainers with the resources required to equip them with the necessary skills set to train tutors.

Staff

In the first year of its inception, project leaders focused their efforts on getting the project up and running. They informed colleagues of the initiative during school and committee meetings. However, this proved to be insufficient and while there was no overt resistance to the implementation of the programme, there was also no explicit support, for instance in the form of promotion of the programme in class. This is a shortcoming on the instigators' behalf which needs to be addressed as it is important for the success of the initiative to 'involve those affected by the introduction of the innovation' (Ashwin, 2002: 223). PAL must be widely supported by colleagues to ensure the initiative is championed by many rather than by two members of staff and also to elicit collaboration for instance by suggesting to students possible activities that may be used in PAL sessions (Capstick et al., 2004). In order to gather the required support, it will be important to put 'the innovation into the context of current conflicts in the system' (Ashwin, 2002). Indeed while at managerial or institutional level, the concerns may be around retention, lecturers and students have different overriding concerns. PAL should therefore be presented to them as 'a tool to shape and support courses' (Ibid.: 225).

Institutional Level

Understanding the mindset of Year 1 students requires a comprehensive strategy and approach at Institute level bringing together the knowledge on Year 1 gathered by DIT Retention Office and the expertise of the Learning and Teaching Centre. The outputs of some of the current Teaching Fellowships may indirectly throw some light on this matter. It is also recommended to encourage forthcoming Teaching Fellowships to specifically research what drives and motivates first year students.

Initiatives such as PAL have been adopted and embedded in all programmes in various Irish universities and IoTs so a concerted effort at institutional level should be investigated and implemented.

Future Work

PAL project leaders are committed to continuing the initiative in the next academic year. As it appears that an early implementation is key to the students' buy in, PAL will heretofore be embedded into the first year students' induction in September. Based on the University of Manchester's PASS experience, the PAL programme will be presented to first years as an opt out option rather than an opt in one, thus incentivising students to get acquainted with PAL and hopefully to remain engaged with it. Tutors who came forward prior to the summer break will be involved during the Induction. They will be paired off with first year students on the basis of their language choice. They will then be required to carry out an icebreaker activity outside of the academic context. Furthermore, a section of the student handbook will be dedicated to PAL thus contributing to giving the programme a greater relevance in the first year student's mind. In parallel, the programme lecturing team will be asked to regularly encourage first year students to attend PAL sessions as a beneficial and enjoyable way of discussing course material covered during lectures. Finally, formal training of project coordinators will be sought in order to enhance the preparedness of tutors and to be of a greater support to them throughout the year.

Conclusion

Implementing a PAL programme in the BA (Hons) International Business and Languages has been a challenging but worthwhile experience. The learning curve has been very steep with much of the experience confirmed by the literature on the topic, by seasoned PAL implementers or by experts in

the field. As Capstick et al. (2004), there is no one model for implementing PAL. PAL programmes need to be adapted both to the organisational and the course contexts. It is hoped the next attempt in the academic year 2010–2011 will provide an opportunity to tackle the many challenges and difficulties encountered in its first version.

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