Learning to Learn: Embedding Peer Support as a Core Learning Skill at Third Level

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Background

• Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT Dublin) - range of courses / 4725 FTEs

• Non-traditional students

• Peer learning – student-centered instructional strategy

  - Strategic Plan (2009-2014)
  - Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy (2011)
  - National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2011)
Learning to Learn (L2L) at Third Level

• **Rationale**
  - learning skills deficit
  - first year retention issues

• **Launched September 2012**
  – mandatory 5 credit module for all first year students

• **Modules aims**
  - help students adapt to a third level educational environment
  - engage students - reflective, independent learners

• **Delivery** - first semester across all disciplines
Learning Outcomes

Identify and engage in the learning process / create a personal learning plan

Study effectively as an independent learner / work collaboratively in a team

Manage time efficiently - plan and organise learning tasks

Use critical thinking / analytical skills to solve a variety of problems

Recognise importance of academic integrity, avoid plagiarism through good practice and referencing

Assessment

Learning journal: students reflect on their learning programme of study 40%

Project or group project, including a written research-based report and presentation 40%

Online assessment quizzes from the Library SCORM tutorials (integrated with Moodle to facilitate grading) 20%

Delivery

Lectures / in-class exercises

Group discussion

Small group tutorials

Introductory IT workshops

Moodle VLE

Online library tutorials
Peer Support: 2 different approaches

Wk 1: Induction week Interview

‘Spiralling induction’

Wk 2: Mid Term Interview

1. Start with the experience of the students
2. Look for Patterns
3. Add new information & theory
4. Practice skills & plan for action
5. Apply in action

Wk 3: Final Feedback

Meta understanding

‘Subject Experts’
Open Questions
Run by the peers

Semester 1
Induction/ First Week Interview
Lab Report Session
Library/ Critical Thinking
Mid Term Interview
Report Writing/Poster Session
Revision

Learning To Learn Module

Semester 2
CREO Support
Electrical Circuits
General Advice

Unstructured Peer Support Sessions
The First Year Experience: Our students lives are complex

- Societies
- Clubs
- Modules
- Peers
- Exams
- 'life'
- Social life
- Part time work
- Volunteering
The First Year Experience
The Peer Assisted Learning Programme

Modules

Peers

Exams

'life'

Engineering Society

Peer Support
Peer Support: 2 different approaches

Wk 3: Final Feedback
- Meta understanding
  - ‘Subject Experts’
  - Open Questions
  - Run by the peers
- Unstructured Peer Support Sessions
  - CREO Support
  - Electrical Circuits
  - General Advice

Semester 1
- Induction/ First Week Interview
- Lab Report Session
- Library/ Critical Thinking
- Mid Term Interview
- Report Writing/Poster Session
- Revision

Learning To Learn Module

Wk 2: Mid Term Interview
- 3. Add new information & theory
- 4. Practice skills & plan for action
- 5. Apply in action
- 2. Look for Patterns
- 1. Start with the experience of the students

Wk 1: Induction week Interview

‘Spiralling induction’
Semester 1 – Embedded Peer Support

Students line up for the trebuchet Challenge. The project for the Learning to Learn Module.

The peers and project team from left to right: Philip Russell; Conor Farrell; Brian Conlan; Gerard Ryder; Paul Quinn; Sarah Talbot; Clinton McCurdy.

Student apply what they learn in the Learning to Learn Module to communicating their progress in the Trebuchet project.

Peer Support during the Learning to Learn module helps student get to grips with the skills they need to succeed in their academic studies.

The 3D Print Challenge night. Representatives from the 3D Printing shop in Rathmines Dublin and others from DCU, UCD, HP stood in to judge team designs. Part of the social dimension provided through the Engineering Society.
Feedback

Activity Rating

- The peer support network
- Exam questions and revision/revision plan
- The report (report writing/mindmaps/formatting the report)
- The poster show
- Group work
- The trebuchet project
- Research/Referencing/plagarism
- Library Skills
- SQ3R/Ebola
- Lab reports/lab skills and writing
- Learning styles
- Why engineering/5 year plan
- Study plan
- Learning Skills
- Induction week activities

Scores range from 0 to 5.
### Student Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you find the peer assisted learning activities useful?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, because it helps students who are struggling with their subject to come up with an idea or ideas of how to solve a problem or how to get the answers to the questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, it was great to get to know each other and to integrate with others in the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, it helped me understand the college system better and what was in store for me in the future of the course. The peers were very helpful in answering any questions that the class had about the course and its modules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, it was good as it gave us more help from people who had just gone through the same thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, you can find the answers to questions without necessarily having to go to a lecturer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Peer tutor Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What were your impressions of the PAL programme?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very good creates a link between all engineering students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good idea, good motivation to help fellow engineering students, have a better chance than you did and make their studies much less stressful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantastic Opportunity for myself and the upcoming first year class to socialise, learn and engage together.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What support do you need as a PAL volunteer?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linking contact between our year and years ahead of us; discuss project ideas and formats with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe try to get a link between 2nd Year and 3rd Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibly we need more preparation and more set questions rather than being handed an exam paper and asking – ‘What questions are you struggling with’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan is good, i.e. weekly meeting to assign tasks etc. Good feedback and preparation. Set up a block for study between weeks to work on this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Peer tutor Comments

**What support do you feel you gave to the first year students?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Support Provided</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Quinn</td>
<td>Personally focussed on the Solid Modelling side of the support as I feel that Solid Modelling is one of my strongest subject areas. This support was provided by simply allowing the student to meet me once a week in order for them to ask me questions regarding the software. The students would come with issues that they had developed from the class time and then hopefully I would be able to tell or show them how to fix the problem or how to go about a certain problem.</td>
<td>Paul Quinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Daly</td>
<td>I supported the first years in problems they were having with Electrical Engineering. This module deals with the basic structures of DC and AC motors and generators. I attempted to answer any questions they may have had, as well as working through tutorial questions and exam papers.</td>
<td>Sarah Daly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How could the scheme be developed next year?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Area</th>
<th>Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Quinn</td>
<td>Possibly some support on methods to convey an idea across to other students. Sometimes I feel that what I am trying to explain is rather complex and I feel that maybe some pointers in how to convey these complex explanations in a simple way would be extremely beneficial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Daly</td>
<td>If at the very beginning of the year, possibly through the induction week, the PEER supporters could assess the free time slots available to them. Once the format of the programme had been established for that particular semester, push the advertisement and awareness for the whole programme – Facebook, through the Engineering Society, posters, Moodle Forums etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Issues Identified

- Organisation of the sessions, finding a common time in the timetable was a serious issue. This needs to be sorted out at the start of a semester through the timetabling process.
- First years needed most support when peers were unavailable.
- Very poor attendance, 3 or 4 max present but mostly 1 or 2.
- Good contact between first & second years.
- Second years needed support in this semester.
References


Sultan F. et. Al. (2013) Helping students with difficult first year subjects through the PASS program, Journal of Peer Learning, 6(1).