Peer Assisted Learning
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This document is a brief introduction to what peer assisted learning is and the practicalities of how it works here at The University of Edinburgh.

Introduction

The origins of peer assisted learning (PAL), in the UK, can be found in secondary education. Senior peers would work with junior partners in the classroom, exchanging learning habits and strategies. Not only does the junior partner develop through this interaction but also the senior helper. Depending on the type of scheme being employed, the peer can be more or less actively engaged with their junior partner in order to successfully achieve aims. A peer assisted learning scheme (PALS) will generally aim to facilitate one or a combination of each of the following outcomes;

- The acquisition of knowledge (what I know)
- The acquisition of skills (what I can do)
- Developing motivation (how much I want to be able to know and do)
- Developing confidence (my belief that I am able to know and do)

There are a number of different types or methods of peer assisted learning. Each type or method can deliver the above outcomes to varying degrees. So it is important to consider the aims of a particular PALS before choosing the type that is to be employed. The most common types of PAL are listed;

- Peer Tutoring
- Peer Modeling
- Peer Education
- Peer Monitoring
- Peer Counselling
- Peer Assessment

With so many different methods to employ under the banner of PAL, which itself can be considered to be a type of cooperative learning, it is unsurprising that the nomenclature is often corrupted and used incorrectly. It is also difficult to imagine singularly employing one method such as peer tutoring and see no sign of other methodologies being used. However, PAL at the University of Edinburgh draws on a blended approach, using suitable aspects of each of the above types. The delivery of each of these specific aspects is through facilitation and not teaching. So the senior student working with the junior partner (frequently a first year) takes the role of facilitator and not teacher, this is an important distinction. As a result ‘the acquisition of knowledge’ is not what such schemes in Edinburgh focus on, rather the three other areas of skills, motivation and confidence. Some of the aspects that can be facilitated by PAL at Edinburgh include;
• Focus on curriculum content (*peer tutoring*)
• The modeling of enthusiasm, effort and cooperation (*peer modelling*)
• Discussion of material in an informal group setting (*peer education*)
• Observing and providing feedback on learning strategies (*peer monitoring*)
• Providing insight on general student life (*peer counselling*)
• Discussing experiences around first submissions, essays & lab reports (*peer assessment*)

Framework

A PALs at Edinburgh would either run for one or two semesters, the decision lies with the particular academic school. Regardless of the duration of the scheme, a general pattern is followed. Sessions usually run every two weeks for one hour. This would mean an average of 5 or 6 sessions per semester, although those schemes that run for one semester often are more intensive. The sessions are best to have a distinct narrative, corresponding to the *stressors* of a particular time of semester. This corresponds to session one focusing on integrating to a new academic environment and the last session of semester addressing examinations. This leaves 3 or 4 sessions to be defined by the academic school. These could be:

• The first essay
• The first lab report
• Problem solving exercise
• Manipulating data
• Managing reading lists
• General student life issues
• Using the library
• Discussing learning strategies

These are of course a few examples of current sessions, there are many more to choose from. These choices bring the uniqueness of a PALs to an academic school. It is better to have fewer quality sessions delivered than trying to deliver a full two semesters worth that students will find little interest in. Within each of the sessions, as well as the particular narrative or topic of the week, it is important to leave space at the end for general discussion. This provides an opportunity for the junior students to set the agenda and feel free to go off topic and ask about an issue of particular relevance to them. It may be the case that this gives rise to the need for a new session.

Delivery

Each PAL session is delivered by at least 2 senior student facilitators that have been fully trained. It is the immediacy of the peer that is key, unlike the perceived distance of a member of staff. New students can feel particularly comfortable discussing difficulties and strengths with a student that has only recently gone through a similar experience. The classes should take place in a classroom to bring a sense of structure to it; however the session itself will be unlike a typical class. Timetabling the session in order to maximise attendance is vital, as is finding a suitable location. It is important that each session is evaluated by the senior student facilitators, what worked well and perhaps what
didn’t work so well. These iterative assessments can then be used, in conjunction with junior student feedback, to produce a final report on your PALs.

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Further Reading


