

# I get by with a little help from my friends - Peer Assisted Learning

By Eve Rapley

We have all had issues and problems in our lives which have been successfully resolved by talking to a friend or a colleague. What makes them able to help is empathy: the ability to recognise and, to some extent, share feelings.

This doctrine has been adopted by the academic world with the use of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL). Based on the Supplemental Instruction (S.I) model developed by the [University of Missouri-Kansas City](#) in 1973 (Arendale 2000), PAL is a scheme that fosters cross-year support between students on the same course. It encourages students to support each other and learn co-operatively under the guidance of students who have 'been there, done that and got the t-shirt'.

PAL emerged in the UK in 2001, after Bournemouth University obtained funding for three years under the Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 3 (FDTL3), from the Higher Education Funding Council for England, to promote awareness, enhance understanding, and encourage the effective implementation of Peer Assisted Learning (Capstick *et al.* 2003). Since then, PAL has become an integral underpinning of undergraduate learning and support at a host of HEIs within the UK, including UWE, UCL, Bucks New University, Middlesex University, Oxford Brookes University, Manchester University and Glasgow University. Under the banner of PAL or PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions), the concept of students helping students has increasingly gained credence and academic respectability. A wealth of research points to PAL as the provider of a strategic benefit in terms of enhanced attainment and retention, as well as to students personally. At London Guildhall University it was 'found that students who attended a peer support session obtained average grades that were higher than for those who did not' (NAO 2002). At the University of Western Sydney mentors noted gains in 'leadership, improved communication skills [and] improved job interview skills' (Carmichael 2003). A U.S. study found 'improvements in the aspirations of economically disadvantaged students as a result of mentoring' (Lee & Crammond, 1999).

Apart from potential benefits in terms of retention and grade improvement (Fostier *et al.* 2007), there are 'intangible benefits, such as an increased cohesion of the student group, reassurance about study concerns and increased confidence. PAL can lead to faster mainstreaming of students from differing ethnic backgrounds and minority groups, as well as international students. PAL can also improve National Student Survey responses (Bettin and Malliris 2007). With the advent of the 2012 fee changes and the greater urgency upon institutions to provide added value to students, the use of PAL looks set to continue.

PAL has five main aims and is intended to help students:

- adjust quickly to university life;
- acquire a clear view of course direction and expectations;
- improve their study skills and adjust their study habits to meet the requirements of higher education;
- enhance their understanding of the subject matter of their course through collaborative group discussion; and
- prepare better for assessed work and examinations.

PAL sessions are intended to be informal and friendly, with an emphasis on everyone in the group working co-operatively to develop their understanding. PAL is about exploratory discussion led by the PAL Leaders. Content for PAL sessions is based on existing course materials – handouts, notes, textbooks and set reading. Its focus is student led and student centred with an emphasis on enhancement for all students.

1st year students enjoy and benefit from the small group work and collaborative discussions that take place during PAL. The PAL environment is one where it is okay to admit to not understanding something, and to make mistakes. Students also welcome the opportunity to meet regularly with a student who has been through the first year and survived it.

Academics should see a reduction in the number of 'minor' requests from students (they are dealt with by Leaders). PAL helps students to become better prepared for their classes, manage their workload, and keep up with course work. Academics benefit from getting regular feedback on how course content is being received by first year students.

The Centre for Learning Excellence is currently finalising plans in advance of launching a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) pilot scheme for September. The pilot will run in computing, sports coaching, education, English and drama, with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate students facilitating weekly PAL sessions. Sessions will typically support the transition and orientation of new students into life at the university as well as de-mystifying the language of academic discourse, helping them get to grips with study skills, and tackling specific unit content. In addition to the comprehensive training which CLE will deliver and the CV-boosting benefits, the PAL Leaders will receive a certificate and a small honorarium in recognition of their contributions.

The initial pilot phase will run from September 2011 to May 2012 and will be monitored and fully evaluated by all key stakeholders. Recruiting and interviewing PAL Leaders is happening now but there is the potential for more undergraduate subject areas to be involved.

Contact Eve Rapley (Centre for Learning Excellence, [eve.rapley@beds.ac.uk](mailto:eve.rapley@beds.ac.uk) ext. 3188) for more information.

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