

PAL at UoB!

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As the academic year draws to a close, the inevitable period of reflection and evaluation begins in order to inform, shape and to refresh for the coming year. For the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) team it will be to look at the University of Bedfordshire PAL scheme and to assess what went well, what was less effective and to plan for September 2013. I am delighted to be able to do this against a backdrop of experiences of PAL from colleagues at Brighton and at Bournemouth, as well as from one of our own PAL leaders.

The University of Bedfordshire PAL scheme began in 2011. Modelled using the Bournemouth scheme as described by Steve Parton and Victoria Noad, its key aims are to help new students:

- Adjust quickly to university life;
- Acquire a clear view of course direction and expectations;
- Develop their independent learning and study skills to meet the requirements of higher education;
- Enhance their understanding of the subject matter of their course through collaborative discussion;
- Prepare better for assessed work and examinations (Fleming, 2008).

Under the leadership of Hugh Fleming, the Bournemouth model is one that many UK universities have opted to use as their template for PAL. It was adopted at the University of Bedfordshire in order to complement and support our own unique and distinct student population, with an emphasis very much on socialising, supporting and nurturing new students prior to taking on a more course curriculum directed emphasis. Whilst the PASS scheme run by Lucy Chilvers at Brighton has a more nuanced course content emphasis, it is both gratifying and heartening to see how we all share many successes and how the trials and tribulations encountered here have also been experienced at other universities. Indeed, in the true spirit of peer learning and empathy, knowing that we are not alone, that there are those who have experienced what we have, is a great source of reassurance to the team who run the scheme here at Bedfordshire. It also serves to remind us that, despite its relative infancy, the Bedfordshire scheme is progressing, evolving and making a real difference to the experiences of both new students and to those students who facilitate PAL sessions.

This issue of the *Journal of Pedagogic Development (JPD)*, with its special PAL feature, is testament to PAL's increasing prominence as a vehicle for supporting and developing new students within the university sector. Far from being parochial and lacking any theoretical underpinnings, the notion of student led and student owned learning opportunities is increasingly gaining credibility and respect within the sector. Since the first

PAL scheme was set up by Kingston University in the early 1990s, student to student support schemes have flourished. Indeed, in their 2011 HEFCE funded major review of student mentoring programmes in UK universities, Andrews & Clark (2011) found that there are currently 340 peer mentoring programmes operating across 159 universities, figures that account for 86% of UK universities.

One might wonder what took the sector so long to realise the value of harnessing the all important and, to us as academics, inaccessible and unique 'insider knowledge' that only current students can provide to those new to the institution. It has been twenty years since Soo Hoo (1993: 386–393) suggested how 'educators have forgotten the important connection between teachers and students. We listen to outside experts to inform us, and consequently overlook the treasure in our very own backyards – the students.'

The notion of experienced students as a resource to enhance student learning and development is not new. Indeed, the social constructionist and socio-cultural theoretical underpinnings of PAL proposed by Vygotsky with his use of a More Knowing Other (MKO) to help students navigate through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Vygotsky 1978) neatly contextualises why PAL can be so effective in supporting new and inexperienced students.

At a time when the student voice and the student experience have never been such prominent items on the institutional agenda of every higher education institution (HEI), it is worth remembering that our students are our partners and, as such, have an important part to play in developing the atmosphere and culture within the university.

Noel *et al.* (1995: 1-27) suggests that 'to make the first year student connection, institutions must adopt the concept of 'front loading', putting the strongest, most student centred people, programmes and services during the first year'. This approach is undoubtedly common to both PAL and PASS, and is something the University of Bedfordshire strives to do in order to improve the transition of new students into the institution. PAL is a major part of this, by providing a regular and safe opportunity for new students to share thoughts, ideas, fears and anxieties with an experienced and approachable student who has been in their shoes. Not every student comes to university equipped and socially confident enough to plunge themselves headfirst into their new academic life. Yorke & Longden (2004: 137) suggest 'for some students, a sense of belonging will develop as a matter of course; for others this may not happen unless the institution makes an effort'. The PAL/PASS schemes at Bedfordshire, Brighton and Bournemouth all recognise the importance of using its leaders as a means of offering new students a lifeline or an anchor point; a means of setting their compass

course, as well as fixing their allegiance to their new institution. Early cementing of friendships and connections with peers and staff within the institution is a vital means of lessening the risk of 'difficult adjustment' and 'social isolation' (Tinto 1975) impacting upon the student experience (and ultimately upon student retention). That said, PAL/PASS should not be considered a panacea for all student ills; rather it should be viewed as one of a series of measures embedded into the institutional fabric as a means of supporting new students into their new academic lives.

The defining character of the Bedfordshire PAL scheme is that of its focus upon not just problem resolution and socialising, but of developing a community of practice (CoP). Using the works of Lave & Wenger (1991) to influence and develop the scheme, PAL is a place for 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. Like colleagues at Bournemouth and Brighton, we believe that having timetabled PAL sessions goes a long way to signalling the importance of PAL to both students and staff, as well as decreasing the risk of PAL being inaccurately badged as being a 'deficit model' (Andrews & Clark 2011: 9) or a place to go 'only if you are stuck'. We aspire for PAL to be more than this; for it to be a place where burgeoning scholars can start to explore and interrogate the literature of their subject in order to begin to (as coined by our own PAL Leaders) 'walk the walk and talk the talk' of their discipline.

Those who are instrumental in developing a CoP for PAL are, of course, our PAL Leaders. I am sure colleagues at Brighton and at Bournemouth would endorse the claim that the success of any PAL/PASS scheme is directly attributed to its PAL/PASS Leaders. Whilst PAL staff might be considered as being back stage crew, it is the PAL/PASS Leaders who are the principal actors; the ones who create an environment of mutual trust, respect, support and fellowship where new students have the opportunity to talk, share and learn.

Whilst literature tends to focus on how peer assisted learning enhances the experience for first year students, it is imperative not to ignore or underplay the impact it has upon those facilitating PAL sessions. Having read the eloquent story of Katrina Cole, one of our own PAL Leaders, it is hugely gratifying to learn of the 'accomplishment and pride' that PAL has been engendered within her. As well as impacting positively upon her students, discovering how PAL has improved Katrina's own communication skills and personal confidence provides compelling evidence of the win-win nature of PAL in terms of benefits for both participants and facilitators. Feedback from many of our PAL Leaders has consistently supported the view of Petrey (2012: 17-31) who suggests how 'transformative learning takes place because peer facilitators emerge with a greater awareness of their own learning and the context of learning as a social activity'.

Developing our PAL leaders is key to the Bedfordshire PAL scheme and is an element we will be working to

improve in the coming academic year via the introduction of cross departmental peer observation and the provision of additional training workshops. Like Steve Parton and Victoria Noad at Bournemouth with their BU Student Development Award, we have teamed up with colleagues from our own careers colleagues to enable PAL Leaders the opportunity to develop their employability skills via the Bedfordshire Edge award. A fledgling enterprise during 2012/2013, we endeavour to make this more of a focus for the new academic year.

Like colleagues at Brighton and at Bournemouth, the undoubted 'Achilles heel' for PAL is that of timetabling. Evidence from the sector is clear that PAL at the 'wrong time' will significantly impact upon PAL participation. We certainly fell foul of this during the pilot phase of the PAL scheme with PAL sessions being timetabled on days when no other scheduled classes were taking place. Whilst we've endeavoured to 'timetable smarter' during this academic year, with a significantly higher number of PAL sessions to timetable, there have inevitably been some groups that have been left with the 'graveyard' timeslots. With a planned university wide roll out by 2014/2015, the team are undoubtedly going to face increased pressure to circumvent the timetabling issues. However, with four newly installed PAL Faculty Co-ordinators and four Associate Deans (Student Experience), the profile of PAL will continue to rise within the institution, something which will inevitably improve its standing, as well as further embedding PAL into the institutional culture of the University of Bedfordshire.

What is evident from the articles by Katrina Cole, Lucy Chilvers and by Steve Parton & Victoria Noad, is that despite the perennial problems with timetabling, concerns over student attendance and staff misconceptions, and a lack of PAL staff recognition and time, the concept of PAL/PASS and its power to reassure, nurture, inspire and to transform cannot be ignored. As stated by Green (2007: 2), 'a well functioning society is bound together by shared beliefs and values that are transmitted from one generation to the next by informal educators'. To use London 2012 as an analogy, the PAL/PASS Leaders from Bedfordshire, Brighton and Bournemouth are our torchbearers, our gamesmakers, those who prepare the ground by welcoming, inducting and developing new students into the culture that is unique to every institution. This involves acculturating them into the language, norms and customs of the institution, smoothing their path into their new life as an undergraduate. By de-mystifying 'university speak', by developing friends and contacts and by developing confidence, PAL/PASS provides a unique community environment which is 'for students and by students' and one which helps give new students a foothold into a new institution.

As we at Bedfordshire look towards our third year of running PAL, we do so with great optimism and determination to build upon our successes in order to foster a strong sense of attachment, alliance and

guidance (Weiss 1969) to all new students at the University.

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Book Reviews

Learning at Not-School

Julian Sefton-Green
The MIT Press (2013)
Review by David Mathew

While some people might disagree that 'it is universally acknowledged across the social spectrum that schools in and of themselves are not the end-all and be-all of education' (the word *universally* is particularly worrisome), it is nonetheless fair to accept that as time progresses, more and more alternatives to a traditional, classroom-based, face-to-face learning experience have become available. These alternatives are what the author terms 'learning in Not-School' experiences, where we learn in not-school environments such as after-school programmes, youth clubs, or on the Web.

This is an interesting idea for a short book of 92 pages, but I do wish that the editing and proofreading had been more robust. However interested one is in a subject, the tightrope of reader interest can be easily twanged by something like the following paragraph (from page 23), which I quote at length.

The 'learner in not-school settings is theorized in two important ways: in respect of their (*sic*) interest, enthusiasm, and motivation, and along an a (*sic*) emotional axis in terms of their relationships with others, especially adults. The former focus in a sense posits the figure of the learner as possessing agency and individual choice that is frequently denied in other settings. Yet the latter focus is often preoccupied with deficits, with the absence of parenting figures in young people's lives and the needs of the young for support and security.'

These sentences are, unfortunately, not alone: this is but one of the book's paragraphs that obliges the reader

to auto-correct errors as he goes along. On plenty of occasions I found myself re-reading a gobblet, mentally painting in the correct punctuation, or smoothing out an imbalanced phrase. And while I fully accept that a book should be the reader's work as much as the writer's, I cannot help feeling that for want of a sterner editorial eye *Learning at Not-School* would have constituted a more enriching reading experience. A pity.

Education in Prison: Studying through distance learning

Emma Hughes
Ashgate Publishing Limited (2012)
Review by Llian Alys

Every year, an estimated 4,000 prisoners study through distance learning (Schuller 2009). Due to staffing, financial and other resource implications, most prison education departments can only focus on basic skills and therefore distance learning¹ offers the 'educated'² prisoner opportunities to continue their learning career (Hodkinson 2004; cited by Hughes 2010). Despite interest in the association between education and crime (e.g. Groot & van den Brink 2010), prison-based education and prison-based distance learning in particular have not received much research attention (Hughes 2012). The small body of work in this area is growing however as evidenced by *Education in Prison*. This book presents the findings of Hughes' qualitative study of prisoners' experiences of distance learning in

¹ Often, this requires the prisoner to fund his or her own education, though some academic institutions (e.g. the Open University) may offer fee waivers or funding for prisoners and the charity, the Prisoners' Education Trust, offers grants for distance learning.

² Not all prisoners who undertake distance learning are educated (or seek to be educated) to university level; some may have completed the prison-run learning programmes and may be seeking to gain secondary education qualifications.