Reaping what you sow. How the University of Bedfordshire uses experienced Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) students to inspire and nurture future generations of PAL Leaders

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An overview of Peer Learning programmes

The origins and value of university peer learning programmes have been subject to frequent exploration in academic literature during the last 20 years. Based on Deanna Martin's (University of Missouri) 1970s model of Supplemental Instruction (SI) (Arendale, 1994), peer learning programmes operate using senior students (2nd/3rd year undergraduates) to facilitate and guide junior (first year) students. By providing a 'safe' environment where first year students can make mistakes and ask 'stupid' questions, experienced senior students can help to model successful student behaviours (Longfellow et al., 2008). They can also support

new students as they begin to forge new identities to enable them to operate within a 'specific learning milieu' (Green, 2008).

Perceived by new, junior students as being more approachable than members of staff, experienced senior students are usually well versed in the ways of knowing how to be successful in their courses (Field et al., 2007). Indeed, as suggested by Longfellow et al. (2008) experienced senior students are 'expert at being students, and thus are arguably better placed to lead novice students towards becoming expert students'. Such students are able to act as facilitators in order to develop activities to enable new students to learn actively and collaboratively. Never a replacement for the lecturer, they guide students by mirroring the curriculum, as opposed to teaching the curriculum (Marra & Litzinger, 1997).

Peer Learning in UK universities

The peer learning programmes seen in UK universities today increasingly have a broader remit than the original S.I based programmes, typically tending to either follow the PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions), or the PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) model. Essentially sharing the same SI foundations, there are nuanced differences, with PASS tending to be more focused on course/module specific topics, whilst PAL programmes often include a broader, more pastoral emphasis, as well as covering subject specific themes. Whatever the philosophical underpinnings adopted by particular universities, the underlying tenets of students working collaboratively together with experienced peers to enhance learning, and to foster a spirit of shared enquiry, are threads that bind all peer learning programmes together. The development of a community of practice, rather than being merely a remedial support platform to target high risk students, is becoming the sector norm. This shift may, in part, reflect the changes seen in the HE sector, with higher education opening to the masses, a situation which has brought with it bigger, and more diverse classes (Kreber, 2006).

Concomitant with increasing student numbers in UK higher education, and with students making significant financial sacrifices in order to attend university, the pressure to retaining students throughout their degree has never been more acute. Universities cannot afford to lose students, nor their attendant income. Lost funding for non-completing students bring with it significant financial implications for universities (Jessop, Herberts & Solomon, 2004). As a result, many universities use peer learning programmes as a means of supporting students as they make the transition in higher education.

Peer Learning at the University of Bedfordshire

Here at the University of Bedfordshire, we continue to make great progress with embedding our own distinct brand of PAL into the cultural fabric of the institution. Since our pilot in 2011 with 7 courses and 26 PAL Leaders, we currently have in the region of 280 PAL Leaders working with first year students within timetabled PAL sessions across the entire university.

As staff awareness and understanding of PAL has continued to develop, a conscious decision has been made to hand over greater responsibility and ownership of PAL to the PAL Leader student team. The success of any PAL initiative rests upon the quality of the PAL Leaders who facilitate the sessions. Motivated, committed and enthusiastic PAL Leaders are key to ensuring that engaging and meaningful sessions are provided for first year students. With our mission to ensure PAL Leaders truly benefit and develop themselves during their tenure, it was felt that this transformation could only take place if PAL Leaders really had opportunities to step up and take ownership of PAL.

Keen to distance ourselves from the oft cited issue of PAL being a remedial deficit model, and a place where PAL is perceived by first year students as being the preserve of weak and stuck students, PAL at Bedfordshire is firmly wedded to the idea of it being student owned, and

student led; a place for first year students to participate informally in exciting course related conversations and activities.

Whilst tutors inevitably provide regular support and guidance to their PAL Leaders, we have been keen to create a student led learning community with experienced PAL students, our 'elder statesmen', playing an increasingly important role. Feedback from PAL Leaders indicated that whilst they were offering peer support to their first year students, they questioned who was providing them with peer support? Clearly, the nature of the support offered by staff cannot ever be the same that provided by a true, student peer. This apparent gap led us to run a series of focus groups in February 2014 with first time PAL Leaders to ascertain the nature of the support and input they felt experienced PAL Leaders might be able to give.

It was clear from these sessions that despite the comprehensive staff led recruitment and training provided for PAL Leaders, there was a sense that new leaders wanted more; more input from those who had been where they were going, and more insight into the practical benefits of PAL. This led to the creation of 2 new roles within the wider PAL student team; PAL Fellows and PALumni.

PAL Fellows
PAL Fellows are returning postgraduate students with previous University of Bedfordshire PAL Leadership experience. The ultimate in having 'been there and bought the t-shirt', Fellows have quickly established themselves as invaluable mentors for PAL Leaders. Since their introduction in September 2014, PAL Fellows have been given CPD to enable them to facilitate PAL Leader training, to mentor PAL Leaders in new course areas, and to initially co-lead PAL sessions with new leaders. In addition, Fellows have supported new tutors (Academic Course Contacts) who have a PAL support remit. Their ability to directly empathise with new PAL Leaders is a dimension of support that staff are simply unable to provide.

Fellows have been trained to undertake PAL session observations and to deliver constructive, positive feedback to PAL Leaders. Again, their ability to empathise and speak from direct experience about particular PAL session approaches and activities has proved to be popular with PAL Leaders. As with first year students and their tutors, there can inevitably be barriers between PAL Leaders and their Academic Course Contacts, particularly at the start of the academic year. However open and approachable Academic Course Contacts are, some PAL Leaders may lack the confidence to admit they are struggling, or that a particular activity did not go well. Similarly, some Academic Course Contacts are relatively new to PAL, and may lack the experience to advise their PAL Leaders about tried and tested activities and tasks that previous PAL Leaders have used.

PAL Fellows have worked effectively at reminding PAL Leaders to remember their training, and to re-visit their handbooks to assist them with planning sessions. Having an additional point of contact; a peer, a fellow student who has been in their shoes; is an invaluable source of assistance and inspiration.

PALumni
Like PAL Fellows, PALumni are graduates who have been a University of Bedfordshire for 1 or 2 years. Now engaged in graduate level employment, these graduates fulfill a role of providing inspiration to PAL Leaders, by enabling new PAL Leaders to see the extent to which the PAL process is a transformational one. They also act as real life experts in knowing how to get graduate jobs, and how to exploit their PAL experiences fully to potential employers.

The idea to continue our association with previous PAL Leaders came during a planning meeting for the April 2014 PAL Leader awards event. Wanting to build upon previous events

where current first year students and PAL Leaders spoke about their personal experiences of PAL, inviting back previous PAL Leaders seemed a logical progression.

Presenting at the 2014 PAL Leader awards, graduates from Childhood & Youth Studies, Music Technology, Computing and Education Studies, spoke with eloquence and honesty about the impact of PAL upon them all. Both from a personal and professional standpoint, PAL staff, and both current and would-be PAL Leaders were able to hear first-hand accounts of how PALumni used PAL to demonstrate a range of employability skills in job applications. They also talked about how employers were keen to know more about PAL, with all of the PALumni reporting how PAL accounted for a significant number of questions during the interview process. Perhaps most importantly, they all confirmed that PAL had been one of the most valuable and enjoyable experiences of their lives.

Keen to harness their inspirational qualities further, PALumni were involved in co-facilitating the September 2014 PAL Leader training. In collaboration with staff and PAL Fellows, they were able to impart to new PAL Leaders valuable strategies, tips and techniques to assist them in undertaking the role. Using both PALumni and PAL Fellows to train and motivate PAL Leaders has added an extra dimension to PAL previously not enjoyed. The ability for these particular groups to empower new PAL Leaders with vignettes from their authentic lived experiences cannot be quantified. Crucially, it cannot be replicated by staff. Their passage through the PAL programme has enabled them to reflect on the experience, resulting in them sharing this with us in order to inform current and future training and operational models.

Next steps for PAL at the University of Bedfordshire
Given the extent of the benefits to PAL by virtue of the input from PAL Fellows and PALumni, our collaboration will be developed still further during the spring 2015 PAL Leader recruitment phase. Working in concert with PAL staff and experienced second time PAL Leaders, PAL Fellows and PALumni will be involved in recruiting new Leaders for 2015/16. Using a group interview approach with both a discussion and small group practical tasks, the experience of the PAL Fellows and PALumni will be invaluable. Their participation, along with experienced second time PAL Leaders, will ensure that the University of Bedfordshire continues to stay true to its ethos of being student owned, and student led. Students are the lifeblood of PAL. Giving them some ownership and responsibility over the process of selecting the next generation PAL Leaders instinctively feels not only entirely appropriate, but fair, both to PAL Leaders, and to the programme more widely. Ploughing back in the real and varied experiences of PAL Fellows and PALumni into the programme, can only serve to create a richer and more fecund environment into which to develop and grow our expanding PAL Leader team.