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How Far Can Peers Go In Supporting Student Learning? A Student’s Perspective

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Outline

• The history
• Student viewpoint
• Perceived benefits
• Drawbacks
• Conclusion
Background and Rationale

- “Peer assisted learning (PAL) is a generic term for a group of strategies that involve the active and interactive mediation of learning through other learners who are not professional teachers.” (Topping and Ehly 2001)
- Art & Design TQEF Peer Assisted Learning (PALs) Project
- Collaborative Partners
- Retention Tool
The Original Structure

- 2008 – looked for volunteers from Y1
- Sept 2008 – trained with staff development support
- Oct 2008 – weekly timetabled class
- Agenda – student driven support
- Initial enthusiasm – attendance declined

- Evidence of retention success (Oct 2009)
Development

- Summer 2009 – limited interest in role of PAL
- Year 1 tutor had to sell it to Y2s
- Personal Development opportunity
  - PALs
  - Year 1 students
- Reduced to fortnightly; alternating classes
- Linked to AIO (PDP module run by Y1 tutor)
My Reflections

- Met by PALs
- PDP questionnaires over first weeks
- Over weeks purpose became less clear
- Attendance declined

- We (the new PALs) thought we could add value
The Enablers

- Peer review during Y1 (Ireland and English, 2013)
- Unilearn (VLE resource created)
- Turnitin (formative assessment)
- Year 2 Students
- Approachable tutors
The New Structure

- PALs became more instructional in approach
- Tasks were given
  - Formative essays
  - Presentations
  - The Big Debate
  - Quants Presentations
  - AIO Questionnaires
The New Structure Cont.

• Ran application process for new PALs
  – Online application
• Current PALs interview (help from HR Dept)
Students’ Reported Benefits

- Over 90% said the scheme was useful
  - Practice essays
  - Practice Presentations
  - Big Debate promoted research in an area they were not fully conversant with

- Students not Lecturers
  - More approachable
  - Similar problems
  - Still fresh in the PALs’ minds
Students’ Reported Benefits Cont.

• Friendship
• Knowledge of the module options
• Help with structure
• Someone to ask the silly questions that are not always silly!
• 80% said they would like to be a PAL
Were expectations met?

Key: where 1 = not met at all and 8 = exceeded expectations
Practice Essay helped to improve my grade

Key: 1= Strongly Disagree; 7= Strongly Agree
PALs Reported Benefits

• Realisation they did learn in year 1
  – By passing on information they confirmed they had understood it
• Gained further experience in presentation skills
  – 12 practice presentations with Q and A
  – Y1 student reactions gave them a critique of the presentation
• Had an excellent addition to their CV
Benefits for staff

- No extra workload
- Potential to shift formative work over to PALs for review
- Tasks complement the core modules
My benefits

- A huge improvement in my essay writing (through peer marking)
- A big improvement to my CV
- Confidence in my learning
- Community in practice. (Etienne Wenger Traynor 2014)
Drawbacks

- Attendance
- Extra workload for PALs
- Cannot cover all aspects of the course
- Some work needs to be done on the feedback from formative work
Conclusion

• Still a work in progress
• Easily changed to suit current curriculum
• Benefits all parties concerned
• Supports students through the initial stages of university
• Supports work in PDP
• Helps with retention of students
References
