

Peer-Led Learning: Challenges and Opportunities

Review based on a formative assignment submitted for the PG Certificate in Learning & Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

This is an academic review of a research report by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) published in November 2014, which focuses on peer-led learning (PLL) in Higher Education (HE). The review argues that although the report is relevant for those who want to set up and/or support peer-led learning in their institution, course and/or teaching, it lacks reference to the “*real-life messiness*” of peer-led learning and teaching – experienced particularly in institutions with a large non-traditional student body.

Keenan, C. (2014) *Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK*. York: The Higher Education Academy. [Online] Available from:
https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Peer_led_learning_Keenan_Nov_14-final.pdf

Review

Recent research by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) looked into the provision of peer-led learning in the UK. The research and its outcomes are summarised in the report ‘*Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK*’ (Keenan, 2014), available online through the HEA’s own website. The research explores how many HE institutions support peer-led learning and how they understand its purpose. The report outlines the challenges and opportunities of peer-lead learning, and highlights examples of “good practice” – not just in the UK, but internationally.

The report shows that the two main organised approaches currently used in the UK are peer-assisted learning (PAL) and peer-assisted study sessions (PASS) (Keenan, 2014). Both approaches support student learning across different year groups and aim to enhance students' experiences of university life. According to the report, most schemes are set up with second-year undergraduate (UG) students supporting first-year undergraduate students with the intention to improve not only the retention and satisfaction of "the newcomers", but also that of the older, more advanced students.

The research report shows that first-year UG students who take part in PLL sessions tend to experience reduced anxiety associated with their transition into HE (Keenan, 2014). They also seem to have a greater sense of belonging and improved academic confidence. As Keenan (2014:17) states, 'peer-led sessions improve "cohort" integration [...] and facilitate "the development of peer groups in the academic environment" '. This supports Tinto's (1975) theory of departure, which implies that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution, seemingly lowering retention rates.

Academically, these students seem to take on greater ownership of their learning, show greater engagement and through that often achieve higher grades. As Bennett (2003) states, motivation influences academic performance, which, in turn, affects students' self-esteem. These factors seem to generate and support a sense of well-being, arguably linked to a greater academic locus of control. The report highlights that those first-year students attending PLL sessions acquired high levels of personal and professional skills, which enhanced their performance and future career prospects (Keenan, 2014). This arguably provides evidence of real benefits to participating first-year students.

According to the report, there are also many benefits for second-year UG students that undertake the role of peer leaders. They also seem to acquire a high level of personal and professional skills. The report argues that the process of mentoring deepens their own learning, improving their grades, relationships and inter-cultural awareness, while their employability prospects widen (Keenan, 2014). However, as the report points out, that for researchers to be able to make clear statements, '[f]urther research is required into the learning gains for leaders, particularly in relation to their self-awareness, personal development as leaders, and employability' (Keenan, 2014: 42).

According to the report, PLL benefits not only the students involved, but also the institutions that support this means of learning, including student retention and progression (Keenan, 2014). The report further states that PLL offers substantial reputational opportunities for universities to demonstrate their active commitment to student experience. Furthermore, it is suggested that on an institutional level

programmes like this offer opportunities for multi-layered partnerships – between students and between staff and students – which not only foster a sense of community, but also allow for participation in wider networks.

In claiming such reported benefits for participating students, peer leaders and institutions, the report is in line with most research studies and publications on PLL. The majority of them (e.g. Boud *et al.*, 2013) report benefits from working with others, both on a personal and institutional level. Hence, PLL is adopted by many HE institutions, and promoted as a tool to raise student attainment and retention. As Smith (2013: 1) states, '[t]hese programs have great potential to be strong assets in an institution's integrated approach to student learning and development'. Arguably, then, PLL has the potential to enhance the quality of education and also enhance the educational experience *per se*.

Despite these perceived benefits, the report highlights some challenges in terms of peer-led learning (Keenan, 2014). These include: gaining high-level, strategic support; achieving commitment and “buy-in” from academics and students; negotiating timetable hurdles; financial and administrative issues; ensuring appropriate training and development for staff and students; and embedding peer learning into institutional culture. As Cartwright (2007) explains, setting up a scheme can be time-consuming and trying to sustain a scheme over a longer period of time can be challenging.

Fortunately, the report provides some examples of successful, innovative practice. The report focuses on case studies in the following areas (Keenan, 2014):

- building a sense of community,
- developing employability gains,
- disciplinary application to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects,
- supporting students with disability,
- online and blended approaches.

Each example provided offers a brief overview of the approach taken and a set of criteria for successful development is highlighted. In addition, the report gives an overview of PLL in the UK, New Zealand, Germany and the US, and presents inputs from six SI / Pass national centres from the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, Sweden and South Africa (Keenan, 2014).

Finally, the report offers eight recommendations for the HE sector and for individual institutions:

- i. 'The Higher Education Academy, the UK National Centre for PASS and other key stakeholders will work together to decide next steps arising from the report
- ii. The national and international peer-learning community should promote the sharing of practice, undertake pooling of data and collaborative research into participative pedagogies, and build a bank of impact studies
- iii. Participate in nationally recognised training and development, ensuring consistent and quality-assured approaches are adopted prior to implementing schemes
- iv. Articulate the purpose and focus of each scheme, identifying the associated evaluation strategy, quality and performance measures
- v. Ensure executive leadership and support, evidencing the presence of schemes in strategic documentation
- vi. Mainstream peer-led academic learning schemes with the curriculum
- vii. Implement schemes early in the student's life cycle
- viii. Engage a broad group of stakeholders for each scheme that will include students, academic staff, employers and other interested parties'

(Keenan, 2014: 6)

Although the report is not aimed at practitioners, it does offer some examples of advice for "new adopters". We argue that, for them, the report provides a useful overview of current PLL initiatives. However, to be truly useful for practitioners, it would have been helpful to not only list the case-study contributors, but also to provide an overview of those who have completed the survey (or at least the institutions these people represent), as the survey data presents the key data used for the report. This would have helped to better understand and judge the study results, for the context makes a difference in the success of a scheme. As Cunningham (1993) points out, the anchoring of a mentoring programme in an organisation and within its culture is key for success.

What is clearly missing here is a (healthy) criticality towards PLL. This criticality seems especially important when working with students from non-traditional backgrounds: our diverse learners. These students often experience financial and institutional barriers when entering HE (Bowl, 2001), barriers which are not easily overcome (Gorard *et al.*, 2007). It would therefore be interesting to know if PLL schemes actually reach this group of students or if they end up "double-neglected" through schemes like this as the gap between them and the other students may be widened further as the traditional learner may arguably be considered "doubly advantaged" – both academically and socially.

As the report states, it can 'be hard to persuade recipient students of the benefits' of PPL (Keenan, 2014:32). This seems to be exactly where practitioners "wrestle" with this kind of approach to learning and teaching. This is highlighted in a case study into the value of peer-assisted learning to mentors and mentees in the School of

Surveying at Kingston University by Smith *et al.* (2007). Here, students resented being forced to participate in what they considered to be remedial programmes: as can be seen, trying to engage students in PLL can be challenging. There is a “real-life messiness” of PLL that practitioners cannot easily overcome. Here, we argue, there is a real need for further research and more critical analysis of existing schemes to be truly useful for those doing ground-level work and trying to make PLL of maximum benefit for all students. Despite this omission, as the case studies portrayed in the report show (Keenan, 2014), there are many examples of innovative practices demonstrating real promise for PLL in HE, and embedded equitable opportunities with and through such programmes. The question that remains is how to take these examples of “best practice” further to offer true benefits to all PLL learners – and also HEIs.

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