One size does not fit all: Adaptation of PAL to suit a small pathway institute

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Abstract

QIBT has drawn on established models of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) to craft a student support mechanism that enhances the first year experience by offering peer-to-peer tutorial assistance across all programs and courses. This involved cycles of development and improvement over time, introduction of communication via online media, and evaluation that tapped opinion of both PAL tutors and student users. As a small institute offering pathway programs into Griffith University, QIBT had the advantage of relative freedom to devise and implement a PAL program that suited its student cohort, despite being confined by limited resources. The result was an important addition to the support initiatives offered at QIBT that develops active and independent learning skills, while providing benefits to all stakeholders.

A need is identified

QIBT provides an opportunity to articulate into Griffith University for international students, and a growing number of local students, who need access to an alternative pathway into a bachelor program. We wanted to offer our students a comprehensive suite of support structures, but lacked the resources. The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) model is widely implemented in Australian universities, and has great potential for win/win for all involved: teachers, learners, and institute, although it demands considerable commitment from both student tutors, by way of leading scheduled sessions, and management, through payment of leaders and provision of supporting materials. This was not possible at QIBT, and if we were to introduce a new student support initiative, it would have to be an adapted model. Thus, our Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program was born in 2007 and strengthens every semester.

Objectives of PAL

We introduced a peer support program:

- To supplement lecturer consultations, and similarly provide peer guidance to aid the construction of knowledge and development of skills. Falchikov (as cited in Longfellow, May, Burke, & Marks-Mar, 2008, p. 95) claimed that expert scaffolding enables students to improve their performance.
- To empower stronger students to become model learners. Lave and Wenger (as cited in Longfellow et al., 2008, p. 95) held that knowledge is distributed through social and language contexts.
- To assist students to take responsibility for their learning, and draw on a range of resources, including student exemplars, to improve their performance.
- To promote active learning by providing a collaborative learning environment with opportunities for involvement and immediate responses (Cowie & van der Aalsvoort;
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PAL Program Development

Like PASS, the traditional model of Supplemental Instruction (SI) involves timetabled, but voluntarily attended, study skills sessions led by successful students at a higher level (Longfellow et al., 2008, p. 94). According to Martin and Arendale, Rust and Wallace (as cited in Longfellow et al., p.94), focus should be on high risk courses rather than high risk students, because students resent remedial instruction. Furthermore, even though teachers are content experts, students are expert learners, so are better placed to lead novice students towards expertise (p. 95). With these guiding principles in mind, in our first semester of PAL we offered only the course with the highest failure rate: Business Statistics, because it was apparent that students in this course needed help the most.

There was much uncertainty and many questions to be answered in the early days of PAL. Would students be willing to offer tutorial assistance without payment? Would students take up the opportunity to learn from their peers? Would lecturers embrace this complementary form of support? How much training was required? How would we spread the word about this new initiative? In the early days of our PAL program, rooms were booked for PALs to meet with students needing help. However, students did not take up the opportunity to learn from their successful peers for fear of being seen as weak or deficit. This was confounding, given claims that “students perceived the [PAL] sessions as an opportunity to sound out ideas away from lecturers without fear of the embarrassment that is common when trying to learn from/with an expert” (Baldry Currens, as cited in Hammond, Bithell, Jones, & Bidgood, 2010, p. 208). Therefore, it was necessary to develop a model that suited our cohort, which involved students initiating contact with PALs on an as-needed basis.

Shaping a fitting model

Clearly, one size does not fit all, and after some 6 years of practice, evaluation, and improvement, we have our current iteration of PAL.

Recruitment

PALs are recruited based on their course performance. Whereas traditional PASS programs have targeted high risk courses, we extend PAL to every course in every program. Students with Distinction (>75%) and High Distinction (>85%) grades qualify to serve as PALs, and are invited to attend training. Surprisingly, the 2012 survey showed strong uptake by students at all levels – Certificate (year 12 equivalent), Diploma (equivalent to year 1 of the bachelor program), and Associate Degree (equivalent to year 2 of bachelor).

Training

This is a significant point of difference between our model and that at other universities. Where others provide 1-2 days of training, we run ours in a smaller timeframe. This includes a description of PAL, logistics, i.e. means of communication between students and PALs and learning settings, benefits to stakeholders, expectations of PALs, and mini videos illustrating good student/bad PAL and good PAL/bad student scenarios.

Expectations

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QIBT PALs can be contacted by phone and email in order to speak to students, meet in person, or communicate in any creative way as agreed between the parties. PALs are obliged to respond to enquiries within 3 days and meet within 7 days (if required). This discourages students from contacting PALs at the last minute for a “quick fix”, and respects PALs’ own commitments. Yan and Kember (as cited in Hammond et al., 2010, p. 209) described students who seek out-of-class help as either ‘engager’ or ‘avoider’, the latter seeking to share their workload and minimise their tasks. The challenge for coordinators of such programs is to prepare PALs to identify avoiders and guide them towards becoming engagers. Thus, there is a strong focus in training on modelling active learning and academic integrity.

Promotion

The list of PALs, sorted by program and course, is posted on the QIBT support website accessed via the student portal. It is promoted by digital signage, class visits, portal newspaper notice, and most importantly by lecturers, who are asked to view PALs as assistant tutors, and to share resources with them accordingly, such as practice exams. A 2011 survey of QIBT students found that the preferred method of promoting PAL was through email messages (28%), followed by orientation (18.12%), and from teachers (15.94%) and friends (14.49%). However, every semester we receive feedback that PAL needs more promotion.

Reward and Recognition

As no monetary payment is offered, students agree to participate in PAL largely for altruistic reasons. Besides the free lunch during training, PALs receive a certificate of appreciation, and acknowledgement during end of semester awards. More recently, PALs have been provided with lanyards bearing their name and semester, and anecdotal feedback suggests that PALs wearing lanyards are often approached informally by students seeking help.

Evaluation

Feedback is sought from PALs at a meeting at the end of semester. A feature of these sessions is the opportunity to share experiences and offer suggestions for improvement. This has led to incremental enhancement over time. Further, all students are surveyed about PAL to determine their attitudes about the program and its value.

Student Satisfaction

As part of the cycle of continuous improvement, a brief on-line survey is administered to all students. A 2011 student survey found that 27.78% of respondents had received help from a PAL, and of those 83.33% indicated satisfaction with the help provided. A 2012 survey returned a 91% approval rating of the PAL program. Of the 47.4% of students who had had contact with a PAL, 78.7% felt that their marks would be better due to the PAL’s help.

Limitations and Risks

QIBT is a small pathway provider delivering three 14 week semesters annually, meaning there is very little time for reflection and refinement. Furthermore, most of our programs are 2 or 3 semester diplomas that articulate directly into the related degree program. Consequently, students can only be a PAL for as little as 1 semester and seldom more than 2, because they are the higher achieving students who tend to progress to the bachelor faster. In true ‘necessity is the mother of invention’ fashion, these limitations have led to the
customised model of today. This also means that we cannot recruit PALs for all courses, especially those in the second/final semester of study.

**Change and Innovation**

Advances in learning technology and pedagogy are driving significant levels of change in teaching and learning, including peer student support (Edwards & Bone, 2012, p. 1). Twenty-first century students demand and deserve flexible ways of communicating, meeting, and accessing support, which presents a challenge to invest energy toward online peer learning support. Turner, Robinson, Lee, and Soutar (as cited in Edwards & Bone, 2012, p. 2) claimed that e-learning offers flexibility through changes in time, place, and pace in terms of access, thinking and working. This informed the Virtual PAL extension, a recent innovation designed to provide more diverse access to PALs.

Formally presented as an asynchronous course website discussion forum, Virtual PAL extends to synchronous chat via social media tools supported by the college including Facebook, Moodle communication modules, Skype, and Google chat. The PAL again acts as the expert in the centre of the peer learning relationship, leading the discussion via technology, increasing student ownership of the experience, guided by the course coordinator as overseer (i.e. one step removed) (Harris & Sandor, 2007, p. 385). Social media offers further flexible access, in the student’s space, again supporting engaging means of accessing PAL support (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009, p. 246). PALs with an inclination toward online learning are invited to attend training with QIBT's blended learning team, participate in induction activities online and then work online in the virtual space with students. They can engage collaboratively on learning problems, sharing knowledge and content. The first evaluations of Virtual PAL are currently being implemented.

**Visions for the Future**

A study by Ning and Downing (2010) found that academic success is predicated not only by academic competence and motivation, but also by learning competence (p. 934). Therefore, our vision is to create a community of learning practice, in which peer-to-peer exchange would include instruction on both course content and learning strategies, in line with constructivist traditions. We aim to achieve this by the introduction of a follow-up training session, which will discuss learning theory in more detail, provide opportunities for role play around responding to PAL enquiries, and movement towards group work. A number of researchers have expounded the social value of PAL in providing opportunities for collaborative learning (Boud et al.; Capstick; Falkishov; in Hammond, Bithell, Jones, & Bidgood, 2010, p. 208), and we intend to encourage the involvement of PALs in study groups, initiated either by PALs or students themselves.

Furthermore, we would like to continue to review and enhance PAL with technologies on offer. In the short-term, innovations can be advanced through further use of social media/social networking/web 2.0 space to create stronger peer learning engagement. In particular, the development of an online PAL learning community using tools such as blogging, wiki-ing, and audio-podcasting could also support the peer learning experience.
Conclusion

Unlike other models of peer moderated learning, the QIBT PAL program was driven by a philosophy of holistic, inclusive, and complementary support across all programs and courses. It draws on constructivist and active learning theories that encourage collaboration between students. A unique model of peer-to-peer support has been developed to suit a particular cohort and delivery model through adaptation of proven methods together with new technologies, and incrementally enhanced through a process of consultative evaluation, for the benefit of all stakeholders in the institute.

References


