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Becoming an effective Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leader

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'Being a PAL Leader has been fantastic. It has proved to me that that I am capable of doing things I did not believe I could do. I have become much more confident, which has helped in my own studies and in preparing for job interviews'

This Directions paper, written by two former Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leaders, (West and Jenkins) and a PAL Tutor (Hill), will support any geographer considering a PAL role. It reflects our experiences of participating in a PAL scheme at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, UK, and research conducted with Geography PAL Leaders over two academic years (2012-2014). Overall, we found being a PAL Leader was positive, good fun, sociable and, as you will see in Table 1, had positive benefits in terms of professional development. As such, we encourage you to get involved in your institutional PAL schemes.

Peer Assisted Learning: background

PAL is an academic support scheme that trains undergraduate students (PAL Leaders) in facilitation and coaching techniques to run study support sessions for other students. PAL originated at the University of Missouri, Kansas City in 1973 and became embedded in the UK in the 1990s. According to Arendale (2014), there are more than 2,500 higher education institutions and colleges operating PAL schemes across 50 countries, where it may also be called PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions), PS (Peer Study) or SI (Supplementary Instruction) (Keenan, 2014). In the UK, PAL normally supplements formal, tutor-led teaching. PAL Leaders therefore provide non-remedial, additional study support.

Although PAL schemes vary, they share similar generic aims:

1. Easing students' transition into higher education by helping them adjust to university life, increasing group cohesion, and offering a clear view of course objectives and expectations;
2. Increasing student success by enhancing disciplinary understanding, improving study skills, raising confidence, and helping them to prepare for course work and examinations;
3. Enhancing student retention due to improved engagement, performance and enjoyment;

4. Developing the transferable skills of students and PAL Leaders that are applicable beyond university study.

How PAL works

PAL sessions are usually linked to modules or courses, with tutors providing variable levels of support to PAL Leaders. University-wide PAL schemes tend to have centralized logistical support via a PAL Office. PAL sessions are timetabled outside the formal curriculum and attendance is generally voluntary but highly recommended by academic and professional staff. Sessions encourage active and collaborative learning, allowing students to explore issues together in a safe, non-competitive and non-judgmental environment. Through conversation, students can test their ideas, assimilate the ideas of others and build deeper understanding. Sessions are problem-based, addressing the content of courses, based on lecture notes, handouts, textbooks, or set readings. The optimum size for an effective session is between 10 and 15 students, facilitated by one or two PAL Leaders, and usually lasting about an hour. These sessions allow small groups time for discussion, encouraging everyone to be involved and to express ideas and opinions.

As a PAL Leader you will probably have attended and passed the same geography modules you are supporting, so you have faced similar challenges. This is your opportunity to communicate potential learning and coping strategies using language that is familiar to your student group. The sessions offer a 'safe space', letting students ask a range of questions and where no question is regarded as 'silly' (Boud, 2001: p1). Sessions allow students to admit their uncertainties and they can be comfortable making mistakes without penalty to their grades or perceived relationship with tutors. Through conversations, students can test their ideas, assimilate the ideas of others and build deeper understanding. Advantages may include increased motivation, confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

In training and acting as a PAL Leader it is important to be aware of potential pitfalls. These include: some students lacking confidence in their peers as learning facilitators and opting out of sessions; variable performance across PAL Leaders leading to inequitable student experiences; and an over-emphasis by PAL Leaders on developing strategic approaches to learning at the expense of understanding geography topics. Additionally, small numbers of students may dominate sessions at the expense of others, timetabling of sessions can be inconvenient, which challenges attendance, and there may be variable buy-in to the scheme by academic staff.

Becoming a PAL Leader

It is natural to feel nervous about volunteering as a PAL Leader; talking to Leaders that supported your own learning will help. PAL Leaders interviewed at UWE clearly moved beyond their 'comfort

zone' at the start of their PAL experience, but they overcame initial feelings of insecurity and vulnerability as they gained experience:

'To start with I was very nervous. As the weeks progressed, I became more confident as my skills increased'

'I was very apprehensive. I probably did not feel that prepared to lead a group of my peers knowing you are slightly superior to them but you're not, you're on the same level'

Most universities run compulsory training programmes for PAL Leaders. These help build your confidence in your inter-personal skills, presentation style, body language, eye contact, and articulation. Other sessions include understanding group dynamics, personal organization, problem-solving, and session planning and reflection. Later in your training you may attend seminars about employability, identifying the graduate attributes you have developed through being a PAL Leader. Some training programmes are recognized by external agencies, such as the Institute of Leadership and Management, adding another item to your CV.

A major attraction of peer learning is the informality that exists between students within PAL sessions. Being approachable and empathetic allows your students to raise areas of concern and uncertainty without feeling they are being judged:

'A tutor will not be looking in on a session and making judgments about what you do and don't understand ... we are all in this together'

'I made it very clear that this was a place where they could come and not feel judged'

You have similar levels of understanding to your PAL students. This enables you to draw on your personal knowledge and to convey it to others:

'A problem that some in the group may be having might be one that the PAL leader themselves experienced in first year and so he/she can give the best advice on how to overcome the issue'

You may feel that you are not academically able enough to be a PAL Leader. Keep remembering that you facilitate discussion between students in sessions; teaching new content is the role of academic staff. You cannot know all the answers to questions. Your role is to direct the students to find their own answers using the resources supplied by lecturers. The key skill is engaging groups of students with materials from their classes, prompting them to ask and answer their own questions, and to think about their study habits. As a PAL Leader you develop good

communication, listening and mediating skills combined with confidence, enthusiasm, initiative and flexibility.

It also helps if you have sound knowledge of the university, your department and your course so you can answer generic questions from your students. Of course, you must attend all of your sessions on time and be well prepared (whilst keeping up with your own studies), which requires good self-organisational skills and commitment. Finally, expect that some students will miss your sessions, or only select a few sessions to attend. It is their choice and you must not take this personally. The UWE PAL Leaders highlighted the importance of not letting poor attendance erode their confidence:

‘That was the hardest thing, dealing with the feeling rejected ... I only had two weeks when very few students came ... that was really, really challenging’

Top tips for planning your PAL sessions

The most important thing to remember as you prepare for your initial PAL sessions is how you felt as you started your geography degree. Everything was new, but you survived, and that makes you better equipped than the lecturers to help your PAL students.

The top tips in Table 2 and your university's PAL training will get you started. Ensure you are familiar with the content to be covered in each session, or which you have selected to cover, and check if there are directed activities available to you from the lecturer that might guide you. Plan your time, but be ready for some activities to overrun, or finish quickly. Arrive at your allocated room with plenty of time to set it up so that it facilitates group discussion:

‘We were able to shift tables around to make groups and create discussion as well as use interactive boards’

Check that the computer and projector are working, get any handouts ready to distribute, and ensure you have enough board markers, sticky notes and other materials. You are now ready!

Top tips for running your PAL sessions

Your training sessions and conversations with other PAL Leaders will provide you with lots of ideas for running sessions (Tables 3 and 4). Most importantly, get to know your group and make sure they know you. Introduce yourself and write your name and contact details somewhere visible at each session. Asking your students to say a little about themselves is a good way to get them talking in your first session.

Remember your role is to lead conversations that allow your students to talk to each other. Activities and discussions that help students work through a problem logically are ideal (Table 4). Dividing the group up to consider issues helps quieter students to express their views and opinions. Occasionally, students will expect you to act as a lecturer. Don't do it! You should be listening to your students for much of the session, allowing them to learn from each other. Remind them of the purpose of PAL and redirect the discussion using questions such as 'What was said in the lecture about this?' or 'Does anyone know the answer to that question?' It is important to wait for student responses. Don't be afraid of short periods of silence as students will need time to consider their answers.

The students will value your opinion on approaches to study and useful resources because you have passed modules. Explaining the study strategies that worked for you (along with those that did not) is helpful. Telling your story can help students to navigate through their difficulties.

It is helpful to finish the session with students talking about other issues which are concerning them. At specific times of the year you might ask about their coursework and exam preparation. Based on these discussions you can develop your plan for the following PAL session.

Benefits of being a PAL Leader

As PAL Leaders you are the real 'winners' in the scheme (Table 1). You tend to deepen your geography understanding by revisiting material, which might lead to you improving your grades. Helping students with their studies can be very rewarding. You will build close relationships with your fellow PAL Leaders and these friendships often remain throughout your time at university. PAL Leadership can also provide you with the confidence to 'step up' and get involved with many of the co-curricular activities offered at university:

'If you can take a step out of your comfort zone and facilitate a PAL session, you can take a step out of another comfort zone and do something else'

Remember to add evidence of your skills development to your CV and job application letters. Being a PAL Leader will let you develop graduate competencies that are applicable beyond university, including understanding how others learn and respond:

'I will be more confident going into the recruitment process knowing that I have got these skills to show off'

'I learnt how to change my style depending on the students that came. Something that will work with one student won't work for another ... you have to be flexible'

As a PAL Leader you self-evaluate and exercise judgement. You are developing agency as a learner, assuming responsibility and gaining confidence in yourself as a result.

However your geography department operates PAL, you can expect the outcome to be positive for you:

'I walk out of every PAL session I run with a smile on my face'

'It gives you the platform to go on to bigger and better things'

In summary, being a PAL Leader will build your confidence, experience and transferable skills, while meeting and working with interesting people. So, why don't you step up to the next level and become a Geography PAL Leader?

Useful resources

University of Exeter Academic Skills and Student Engagement Team, 'How to be a Peer Leader': http://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/academicservices/educationenhancement/studentengagementskills/How_to_Peer_Leader_FINAL.pdf

Oxford Brookes University School of Business, Guidance Manual for new PAL Leaders: <https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/download/attachments/70123573/PALdoc.pdf>

University of Bedfordshire, PAL Leader videos: <http://www.beds.ac.uk/pal/showcase/pal-leader-comments>

University of Minnesota, PAL Leaders activities: <https://www.lib.umn.edu/smart/tried-and-tweaked-activities-re-energize-peer-learning-sessions>

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Boud, D. (2001) Introduction: making the move to peer learning. In D. Boud, R. Cohen & J. Sampson (eds) *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning from and with each other*. London: Kogan Page, pp. 1-20.

Keenan, C. (2014) *Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available at:
https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Peer_led_learning_Keenan_Nov_14-final.pdf. Last accessed 27 February 2017.

Table 1: Benefits of being a PAL Leader

1. Developing your leadership skills as you have to present with conviction on a regular basis to student groups
2. Building your critical reasoning and problem-solving skills
3. Developing your personal and professional skills (e.g. listening, explaining, presenting, questioning, decision-making, team-working, managing time), which will enhance your CV, increase your graduate employability and count towards your institutional 'graduate passport'
4. Developing your disciplinary understanding by revisiting and reviewing your earlier course materials, and possibly deepening your understanding of your course materials
5. Improving your self-confidence and self-awareness, spurring you on to try new activities
6. Gaining satisfaction from helping your peers
7. Opportunity for you to become a Senior PAL Leader/PAL Mentor, passing on good practice to new PAL Leaders
8. Networking with academic and professional staff, and other PAL Leaders, perhaps leading to broader teaching, learning and research opportunities
9. Opportunity to attend national/international PAL conferences and other external events
10. Possible learning credit and/or payment by your institution for the time you devote to PAL

Table 2: Top 10 tips for planning your PAL sessions

1. Talk with the academic contact for the session or your PAL Academic Tutor if you have any queries about a particular session
2. Ensure you are clear about what you want your students to achieve during your session (clarify session aims)
3. Identify the activities you are going to run and the time these will take – plan for your activities taking longer (which can be removed?) or shorter (do you have an extra activity?) than you expect
4. Reflect on your previous session and use it to inform the content and running of your next session
5. Share your session ideas and materials with other PAL Leaders
6. Arrive at your session 10 minutes ahead of time to prepare the room and your materials
7. Set up the allocated room so the layout promotes group discussion and interaction
8. Ensure you have enough copies of handouts/exercises, board markers and erasers, highlighter pens, sticky notes, flip chart paper, etc
9. Check the computer and projector work
10. Have a contingency plan in case the computer fails or your student numbers are different than expected

Table 3: Top 10 tips for running your PAL sessions

1. Write your name and email address on the white board at the start of each session
2. Introduce the session aims and summarize them at the close
3. Plan your activities to fit the time slot and start and end your session on time
4. Use relevant and engaging learning activities to review course material
5. Split larger groups into smaller groups for some activities
6. Listen to your students in addition to asking questions - a good ratio in terms of session time is 70% listening, 20% questioning and 10% clarifying
7. Incorporate personal experiences in your discussions
8. Summarize key points and check students' understanding regularly via questions
9. Monitor student engagement, encourage quiet students to contribute (by writing their ideas or contributing verbally in small groups) and offer positive reinforcement
10. Ask your students for their ideas for future PAL sessions

Table 4: Ten useful activities for PAL sessions

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1. Think-Pair-Share | Students are given a question/concept and are encouraged to first consider it individually, then in pairs and finally to share their answer/thoughts with the wider group. |
| 2. Key Terms | Ask students to compose a list of key terms from a lecture. Scramble the terms and encourage student pairs to organize them into several categories that are meaningful to them, explaining their choice of categories. |
| 3. Peer Feedback | Divide students into groups of two or three and ask them to exchange and read through each other's work in progress. Ask them to discuss the work, looking at issues such as content, argument, evidence, writing style, grammar and spelling. |
| 4. Know, What? Learned | Draw 3 columns on a whiteboard and title them 'What I Know', 'What I Want to know' and 'What I Learned'. At session start, through discussion with the students, fill in the first 2 columns. At session end, fill out the third column with the students. This will highlight their progress during the session. |
| 5. Lecture Summary | As a group, the students summarize a previous lecture on the whiteboard. They can do this from memory to begin with and then add further material from resources. This is a useful revision exercise. |
| 6. All The Answers | Split your PAL group into two teams. Ask individuals to think of three topical questions (with model answers) to pose to the other group members and have a scoring system for correct answers. Prizes add a competitive edge. |
| 7. Revision Cards | Take a stack of note cards with you to your session, with a question written on one side of each card. In the session, distribute the cards and ask students to answer the question on the reverse side. You can also have a number of 'complete sets' for students to take away at the end of the session. |
| 8. Presenting Scenarios | Select several 'problems' from a recent lecture. Divide the students into groups. Give each group a problem to work though and ask them to write out the solution on the whiteboard. They can use a textbook, class notes or web sources as prompts. |
| 9. Identify the 'Big Idea' | Ask each student (or pair/trio) to explain to the group what he or she thought was the most important concept, idea or new piece of information they learned during a particular lecture/class. |
| 10. Taboo | Ask students to prepare note cards with module-relevant vocabulary. In turn, each person in the group must explain a term to the other group members without using any of the words written on the card. The other students must then guess the term/concept. A scoring system can be included to add an element of competition. |