



THE PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY
PROCEEDINGS OF THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE
MAY 17-19, 2012
NEW YORK CITY COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY OF
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
BROOKLYN, NY 11201-2983

**Students at the Center of Learning:
Perspective on Challenges Facing Traditional Pedagogies**
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Abstract

In this keynote, current issues in the United Kingdom (UK) are explored, highlighting the need for reconsideration of traditional pedagogies to better prepare students for, firstly, lifelong learning; secondly, gainful employment beyond their degree programs; and thirdly, playing their role as engaged global citizens. The trebling (in many instances) of student fees, concerns about secondary school grade inflation and spoon feeding, and inadequate rigour in course delivery are all 'blamed' for 'transition' and retention issues, while questions about 'value added' and return on investment have been raised as issues in UK higher education. A parallel set of criticisms resonates with Arum and Roksa (2011)'s findings written up in *Academically Adrift: limited learning on college campuses*, particularly their contention that "American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students, and persistent or growing inequalities over time" (p. 30). An exploration of possible ways forward are explored, suggesting that Peer-Led Teaching and Learning in the toolkit of higher education institutions seeking to address these concerns from a student support perspective could be of great benefit.

This presentation is about current learning and teaching issues in the UK and the need for all of us, in the UK and the United States, to challenge traditional pedagogies for the sake of our students. I will be focusing mainly on the UK experience - 163 Higher Education Institutions (HEI) spread over the four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - but I look forward to what I'm sure will be a lively discussion afterwards about comparisons with the US.

As I noted in my abstract for this presentation, there are many factors in the UK presently that are leading to questions being asked about traditional pedagogies and how we maintain the excellent quality of our student experience, as well as what the way forward might be. The trebling, in many instances, of student fees in England, concerns about secondary school grade inflation, and inadequate rigour in course delivery are all 'blamed' for transition and retention issues. Grade inflation in degree courses also prompts questions about quality: a record 53,215 undergraduates – one-in-six – finished courses last summer with top degrees, according to figures published in January by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency. These numbers have increased by 125 per cent in a decade.

The current economic climate across the UK is challenging, as it is in many countries. In the higher education (HE) context, as well as the increase in student fees in England, there are fee regime changes in other countries of the UK, for home students as well as for international students. Teaching budgets have been reduced. At the same time student numbers are increasing and the student population is becoming increasingly diverse. One in five students in the UK is international. Transnational education is also increasing: the UK has 13 campuses abroad, (and the US has 78). The diversity of the student population is to

be celebrated, but how do we ensure consistency of quality, and do we feel confident that traditional pedagogies can cope with the diverse needs of a wide range of students?

Retention rates in the UK could lead us to conclude that we are making some progress. The latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics show that for young full-time first degree entrants the average continuation rate at university for the UK as a whole is 92.8 per cent. In the US the comparable continuation rate is 72.2 per cent (*Enrolment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2010; Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2010; and Graduation Rates, Selected Cohorts, 2002–07*, National Centre for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, March 2012.) The most recent OECD data published in 2009 showed that the UK's degree completion rates were among the highest of any OECD country.

But we must be sure to keep a watchful eye on retention and widening access and participation. In Wales, the *For our Future 21st Century* strategy and plan for higher education includes proposals for maximising participation into HE, particularly through more flexible pathways. The strategy also has an ambition for a greater proportion of the population to achieve higher level skills. The Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland's consultation on Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland up to 2020 focused on maximising opportunities for all who can benefit from HE – this includes flexible learning, widening participation and postgraduate research and training. This is all work that the HEA is involved in.

At a national level, the HEA supports the sector by working with institutions and other bodies to develop evidence-informed approaches to improving the retention and success of all students. We have undertaken and commissioned research studies, literature reviews and research syntheses relating to improving student retention. The research suggests that factors contributing to improving student retention and success are:

- Pre-entry information, advice and guidance to inform HE choices;
- Pre-entry preparation, including developing realistic expectations and skills;
- Induction and transition support;
- Inclusive curriculum design, learning, teaching and assessment;
- Social engagement with peers and HE staff;
- Integrated or aligned academic development;
- A range of student services;
- Monitoring and use of data.

The sector is working together on a major project called *What works? Student Retention and Success*, funded by the English funding council and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The primary purpose of the programme is to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation about the most effective strategies to ensure high continuation and completion rates. It involves seven projects and 22 HEIs, who are generating evidence about strategies and interventions to improve student retention and success.

This work suggests that student engagement lies at the heart of retention and success and therefore offers institutions the answer to their improvement. Essentially institutions need to attend to not just the number and range of interventions or services they provide, but the quality and extent of the students' interactions with those as well as the institution more broadly. Successful higher education depends on a partnership between a student and the institution they attend, and this focus can be seen in work happening across the country.

The Welsh HE sector's new enhancement theme - Graduates for our future –graduates identified in higher education institutions and sector organisations in Wales This would enable them to focus their learning and teaching activities on three work-strands: Students as partners; Learning in employment; and Learning for employment. In a keynote speech at the first national learning and teaching conference for higher education in Wales, organised by the HEA last month, Dr Victoria Gunn, Director of the Learning and Teaching Centre at the University of Glasgow, stressed the need to build institutional teams and national partnerships to sustain developments in employability: this had been the lesson learnt in Scotland where there had been a similar enhancement theme. Student views, she noted, are of paramount importance and are needed to assess how graduate attributes can lead to enhanced employability.

It is interesting to also note that the Scottish Government's proposals for institutions to develop student partnership agreements, contrasting with student charters in other parts of the UK. The National Union of Students in Scotland has been discussing a focus on student learning for the forthcoming year, which ties in well with the new enhancement theme of developing the curriculum. There has been much discussion about what this means for students and what student-led learning really means. There are external factors pushing curriculum development, like international recruitment and employability, but how can students and student groups really get involved? The HEA Student-led Teaching Awards project, piloted in Scotland, has been highly successful in this respect, not just in celebrating good teaching but also in involving students generally in discussions about their learning. The next stage of this joint project between the HEA and the NUS will bring students and staff together in increasingly diverse ways, and is likely to take widening access as a focus, and examine how learning styles might change. It is fantastic to see the success of this partnership working; the numbers of those students participating has gone up dramatically - 30 000 nominations have been received from students.

Involving students by putting them at the centre of their learning is clearly of paramount importance and, I think, holds the key to future success. It is likely that increasing numbers of students will need to study in different ways in the future – part-time study, work-based learning, etc. If our work is about improving outcomes for students, it is imperative that we implicitly understand the needs of students – all students. Many in the HE sector, throughout the UK, are refocusing their attention on the student experience and in engaging students as partners. This takes many forms including a whole-institutional approach to learning and teaching, involving students in areas such as curriculum construction and delivery, as well as a renewed focus on involving students in the key area of employability, an area that they are understandably concerned about.

A focus on employability is now embedded into the curricula at many HEIs in the UK. We know from student experience surveys that students are concerned that their university experience equips them with skills and attributes for the workplace and maintains a focus on employability. For example, the results from the professional development section of the HEA's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2011 had some of the lowest scores of the whole survey (though they were significantly improved from the 2009 scores):

- 44% agreed with the statement "I am encouraged to think about the range of career opportunities that are available to me" (compared to 37% in 2009);
- 50% agreed with the statement "I am encouraged to reflect on my professional development needs" (compared to 43% in 2009);
- 47% agreed with the statement "I am encouraged to reflect on my career development needs" (compared to 40% in 2009.)
- As a sector, internationally, we must be committed to equipping students with the attributes and skills they need not only to find employment after university, but also to develop as individuals.

We must be sure that ALL students have the opportunity to do this, and involving students in key initiatives will help to achieve this.

Employability is also one of the HEA's seven themes – we use these to focus the work that we do with the sector, and to help those in the sector to focus on the key areas that they have identified as being important to them. And much of the focus of this work has students at the centre. For example, through the HEA departmental teaching development grants (£1.5m per annum), the University of St Andrews' School of Biology has initiated a project that involves students in employability. This involves an employability-based series of tutorials which bring together academic staff and students across year groups. Five undergraduate students act as interns, identifying employment sectors which may be of interest to Biology students. They then interviewed representatives from appropriate employment areas, and chose staff members as tutors to support the tutorial pilot. A series of eight tutorials were devised in the pilot, four of which were designed to be led by staff and the remainder for the peer groups to meet and discuss without staff supervision. Questionnaires were designed to measure student self-efficacy re employability, student self efficacy re learning, and staff self-efficacy re teaching for employability. A total of 64 Biology students across years 2 and 3 agreed to participate in the study.

The project has been invited to present to Biology departments at the University of Aberdeen and at Imperial College. Visiting external examiners were impressed by the obvious feeling of enterprising partnership that this project has brought to the fore among students and staff. The project leaders comment: "The project is proving to be a strong example of how students can be effective agents of change." The UK's Teaching and Learning Research Programme 2010 reminded us that the 'employability and skills agenda set down by government may not be fully shared by students' – another reason to ensure that students are involved in shaping this work. Looking at discipline-specific work, the PALATINE Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music brought together work on entrepreneurship and employability, investigating a range of approaches being used on Dance courses to promote entrepreneurial learning through creative practice. The BA (Hons) Dance degree at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, they reported, "aims to deliver entrepreneurship through modules at all levels; developing the students' abilities to organise and present themselves and their work to a professional level through a range of management, performance and promotion skills. Work placements and work-based learning ensure real-world experience; the use of learning contracts encourages each student to develop their own pathway and to take charge of their own learning, reflection and collaboration."

Work-based learning to enhance employability skills can also be an area in which students can shape what they need. For example, a case study in our recent 'Pedagogy for Employability' publication reports that 'students on the Fashion Studies degree at the University of Leeds can undertake elective industrial placements as a credit-bearing part of their award during the second year of the programme. While this practice is firmly embedded in a good deal of curricula in Fashion and Textiles at a national level, the demonstrable, innovatory element is the level of student engagement within the process of identifying, procuring and managing the placement.

- a) "The module's learning environment has been significantly enhanced by the support materials that are provided. Technology is used in securing, monitoring, assessing placements and in reflective elements of the module, which has led to innovative approaches within the curriculum and developed the nature of the contributions and engagement of both students and employers.

- b) “There is also a strong in-built reflective element, as students are required to review these experiences to help successful progression and development through their final year of study..... This process has proved to be extremely valuable as a learning and developmental tool in supporting student success and in recruitment and retention, as many undergraduates actively seek out courses that provide work-based learning, returning to the final year with a more professional and mature approach to their studies.
- c) “The accelerated learning that often ensues during the placement does not end upon the return to University and there is a clear and associated continuation of this positive, experiential learning into the final year of study, where students involve their commercial experiences to inform their creative, working practice and enhanced professional attitudes during their final year.
- d) "There is a marked difference between those who have taken a placement and those who have not..... This manifests itself in several ways: there is often a marked improvement in the grade profile and exit velocity; students are more proactively engaged with the award and their learning environment; and they are frequently more proactive in seeking employment prior to completing their degrees (though many are actually offered graduate-level employment with the original placement provider.

So employability is an area in which students can get involved to shape their learning and experience. Another is assessment and feedback, also an area that tends to attract low scores in student experience surveys undertaken in the UK. Our work in assessment and feedback with the sector is wide-ranging and has recently included a workshop at the University of Ulster: ‘Assessment and feedback: Students as change agents’. This workshop outlined the role of the student voice, set the context for change in assessment and feedback, and considered suggestions for future working. Much work has been done by us and by others in the sector - for example, the Oxford Brookes ASKe CETL project - on peer assessment and PAL (peer-assisted learning), both of which put students at the centre of the assessment process.

PAL is a student-to-student secondary support system – not unlike PLTL - which gives students the opportunity to improve their understanding of core modules and provides the opportunity for both academic and personal development of not only the attendees but the PAL leaders as well (Capstick, 2003 and Peer Learning, 2003). As you know, PAL started in the US as “Supplemental Instruction” in the 1970s but was first implemented in the UK in the early 1990s, with the view to aid and support students in their first year of studies. A good example of PAL in action can be found at Oxford Brookes Business School, where PAL sessions are facilitated by second and third year students and benefit not only the attendees but also the leaders and the university as well. Volunteers from Stage II (i.e. post-first-year) lead weekly lunchtime sessions on Stage I modules (i.e. first year) and increasingly some Stage II modules. PAL encourages collaborative, rather than competitive learning and allows attendees to make mistakes and build up confidence in the privacy of small group learning (UCL, 1996). Not unlike what I witnessed at Florida International University’s PLTL sessions earlier this year.

Oxford Brookes comments that PAL benefits PAL leaders and the university and module leaders, but that it is the attendees who benefit the most. It is reported that they gain:

- Collaborative learning through knowledge sharing
- Clearer understanding of course content
- Enhanced interpersonal skills

- Increased motivation
- Improved grades
- Support network
- Improved self confidence
- Improved essay writing skills and exam techniques (Peer Learning, 2003)

PAL Leaders are the ‘real winners’ according to Donelan (1999), as they gain:

- Additional critical reasoning and problem solving skills
- Improved self confidence and self awareness
- Satisfaction from helping and sharing experiences
- Enhanced leadership, communication, interpersonal and team work skills
- Enhanced understanding of assessment procedures
- A larger network of people within the university
- Additional evidence for their C.V. and increased graduate employability

The university and the module leaders also benefit in terms of:

- Increased student attendance in lectures and seminars
- Improved grades leading to improved reputation
- Lower failure rates on difficult modules leading to lower attrition rates
- More dedicated students
- More mentoring and interaction with students
- Better network between students and lecturers
- Improved integration within all years of the university
- A more confident and contented first year
- Increased graduate and employability for its PAL Leaders

Is this beginning to sound familiar?

There is also a brilliant example of PAL at the Royal Veterinary College, University of London. Its instigator, Dr Sarah Baillie, won a prestigious National Teaching Fellowship Award for her work in this area, using a simulator, the [Haptic Cow](#), that enables students to teach their classmates the basic skills required to perform important veterinary procedures. The PAL project team, Dr Sarah Baillie and Helen Shore, have also developed a ‘Train the Trainers’ workshop with assistance from Dr Deborah Gill, University College London. The workshop includes sections on: ‘Lesson Planning’, ‘Aims and Objectives’, ‘Questioning’, and dealing with shortfalls in knowledge. After attending the workshop, peer tutors were trained to use the simulator and then delivered one-to-one practical classes in a didactic format using a predetermined lesson plan.

In feedback, students were very positive about PAL. The tutors considered it helped with their communication skills and confidence in a range of contexts. The learners appreciated being taught by someone who “really understands how difficult this is!”

The project is running a PAL workshop ‘Train the Trainers’ for all students in third year with the aim of providing them with skills that would enhance their learning in intramural rotations (IMR) and extramural studies (EMS). In the long term, if PAL were incorporated into the curriculum, the team comment on their

website, and became a legitimate outcome in undergraduate education, then the vets of the future would be better equipped for their role as EMS providers.

How can this non-traditional model be taken forward, and used in the future to improve the student experience? It's my contention that the PAL and PLTL approach have a lot in common, and could work together to broaden their institutional impact. My colleague, Steve Outram, will explore with you more on Saturday, taking a strategic approach to embedding such innovations. I'm delighted that the FIU PLTL team will be presenting a case study at the HEA Conference in July, and we can press on with our strategic dialogue.

At the HEA, we are concerned with bringing about positive change in learning and teaching in higher education, involving students at the centre. We do this by recognising and rewarding excellent teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and by helping to influence, shape and interpret policy. We must ensure that we remain flexible enough to move with the times, so that we can support HEIs in delivering what new generations of students need to be successful. As the sector experiences some immense changes, we need to be ready to support students in their own learning and development, and in getting the best out of their time at university and beyond. We must be open to new models, that can sit aside those that are tried and tested. It is time to question traditional pedagogies. The government in the US, as illustrated in the text *Academically Adrift*, and the government in England, are questioning what real value students are getting out of their higher education degrees. Both PAL in England, and PLTL in the US, offer added value in a range of ways offering a pedagogy which clearly places students at the centre of learning, thus empowering them to move forward confidently in the future.

Cite this paper as: Marshall, S. (2013). Students at the center of learning: Perspective on challenges facing traditional pedagogies. *Conference Proceedings of the Peer-Led Team Learning International Society*, May 17-19, 2012, New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York, www.pltlis.org; ISSN 2329-2113.