

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

COMMUNICATING WITH ELECTRONIC JOURNALS

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Several years ago we began our PLTL project at Brookdale Community College (NJ). We started with a pilot project in two sections of our General Chemistry I. In listening to all the people I have heard speak about their PLTL experiences at various conferences it appears that our experiences have been pretty typical. When we started we dealt with many of the same problems people described at the conferences. There were periods of great joy and great frustration.

In the first year our leaders wrote detailed journals. Many other PLTL groups also found that having their leaders write journals to be helpful. We developed a general format for the journals. Part of the reports/journals was questions leaders and their students had. Journals also included comments or problems that the leaders encountered in their sessions as well as a list of covered workshop problems. Each week our student leaders would post their journals online.

One of the pressing questions during our first year was whether or not the students should be given answers. Both the leaders and the students became quite frustrated because answers were not being provided. Leaders wanted to give answers and students wanted to have them.

When this question first arose I started an online chat using e-mail. Leaders and faculty member gave input. The discussion was heated, heartfelt and long. Ultimately we decided to trust the PLTL method, i.e., we took a leap of faith. We decided not to provide answers. It wasn't until students began seeing their grades dramatically improve that they were willing to trust that PLTL was transforming them.

Many other questions and problem that arose were dealt with in a similar fashion via the internet and in our weekly meetings with leaders. There were only a few occasions where we assembled the entire PLTL staff – teachers and leaders – in a formal gathering to problem solve and deal with questions. Most of the time the online discussions allowed us to identify and address problems very early and very effectively. Having a group to help think through problems was invaluable and more often than we expected solutions came from our leaders.

Some of the speakers at the 2003 PLTL Annual Leadership Conference described developmental stages in their PLTL projects in which they touched on a bit of their history, growing pains experienced or even mentioned doubts that arose about whether or not PLTL would actually work. In addition to classroom discussions I communicated directly with my students through e-mail and so whenever they had concerns or worries we would discuss frequently via e-mail and sometimes in

person. This allowed me to involve leaders in problem-solving since they worked with students weekly and could help by giving me useful feedback.

As all of us who have used PLTL in our classes know, the leaders are the heart and soul of this program. For me the feedback that leaders provide inspires me, keeps me current with how students are finding the course while it also gives me answers to questions that I have not been able to answer about individual students. Our regular online discussions proved invaluable in this process. The immediacy of using the computer allows me to get and give feedback right away. Working through the questions from student leaders about what to do was handled very quickly so problems never festered.

PLTL has inspired me so much that I have written articles, given presentations and even a number of workshops in an attempt to communicate with others the excitement I feel for the approach.

So far, I have written two lead articles in national journals:

◆“Good Students Become Great Leaders,” *Strategies for Success*, Benjamin Cummings, Spring 2003, issue # 39. [It is the lead article at <http://www.awbc.com/events/strategies/newsletters/index.html>, select issue # 39.]

◆“Teamwork Works,” *NEA Higher Education Advocate*, October 2003. [It is the lead article (<http://www.nea.org/he/advo-new/front.html>), choose the October 2003 issue.]

I was very impressed with what other colleges and universities have accomplished using PLTL. I came away from the 2003 Leadership Conference realizing that I still have a lot to learn. I published, spoke and gave workshops mainly because of the enthusiasm that I have for PLTL and how successful it is. I just wanted to get the word out.

What always surprises me is that PLTL is such a simple technique yet it is so powerful. It provides the same statistics as the more complex approaches such as Guided Inquiry (POGIL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). All increase retention, improve grade distributions, student understanding, critical thinking, confidence and ability to work in teams. They all lead to increased numbers of students enjoying and taking more chemistry courses.

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