

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## REFLECTIONS ON LEADER TRAINING

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In an early session of the Workshop Leaders' Training course at the City College of New York, held once a week for the student leaders, we did an exercise where we broke up into pairs; one of us was supposed to solve a chemistry problem and the other was supposed to listen (and possibly provide guidance if their partner got stuck). I had always fancied myself a patient person. I believed that I possessed the necessary qualities for being an effective workshop leader; I am genuinely interested in helping people learn, I am passionate about the subject matter, and I know the material. This exercise taught me a valuable lesson to the contrary, and I know that both my workshop students and I have benefited.

We were given a problem that was designed to test our knowledge of the concept of equilibrium. My partner was supposed to solve the problem and I was supposed to be the listener. She gave an answer that I knew to be incorrect. I initially attempted to direct her to the right answer without telling her, suggesting that she look at a certain aspect of her premise which was incorrect. This proved fruitless, and I then told her that she needed to redo part of her answer. This was met with a great deal of resistance. She wanted to stick with her answer and was not interested in alternatives. I could not convince her to come up with another solution, so I told her what I thought the answer should be and why. When the whole group reconvened and discussed the outcome of our exercise, my partner criticized me for being too quick with the answer; I in turn criticized her for not trying hard enough.

Upon reflection I realize that the weight of the situation would have rested almost entirely on me as a workshop leader, in a real classroom situation. I have a hard time keeping my mouth shut when I know the answer and I see someone struggling with it. While I recognize how important it is to not give away answers to the students, the class proved pivotal in making me a more effective educator.

What we are trying to do is instill students with self sufficiency, giving them the skills they need to think critically and solve problems on their own. Divulging answers only serves to reinforce their reliance on me for those answers and they tend to call me over whenever they are stuck. I also blamed myself for not encouraging my partner properly. I believe it is the job of the workshop leader to cajole reluctant students to participate, to reap the full benefits of the workshop program. To this end the workshop leader must be adept at evaluating the students on a case-by-case basis. Some will respond to the tough-love approach, while others may need to be treated gently and delicately.

The simulation in class allowed me not to make these mistakes: I was able to learn and correct for them before I led my workshop session. Based on student reactions and my own observations, the workshop session went more smoothly than I could have hoped. I was able to tell the students in the

very beginning that I was not there to give answers, but to show them how to find them. This attitude initially met with resistance. Many students felt that they had tried the problems and could go no further. With the help of an initial icebreaker where the students introduced each other, I am happy to report that by the end of our initial two-hour session, students were working together quite effectively at solving the problems and not asking for my help.

Our Biology workshop program is a pilot and attendance is not mandatory, so it was encouraging to find that the workshop attendees' average performance on the first exam was above that of the class as a whole.

I believe it is a very important skill for an educator to learn how to properly motivate and captivate the interests of the students on a particular subject matter, but in all fairness it is also the students' job to meet the teacher half way. The workshop program provides a medium where a student is encouraged to go the distance; it serves to bridge the gap between the lecturer and the students, and benefits all involved. In my experience class discussions become more meaningful because the general level of preparedness goes up, the students improve at problem solving, study groups form, motivation and self reliance are enhanced. The workshop leaders benefit too. Their participation enables them to reinforce the knowledge of the material in their own minds, as well as derive a feeling of self satisfaction from helping others learn.

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