

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING THE EXPERIENCE OF LEADING

FIRST-TIME FEELINGS

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Firsts are special – a first rollercoaster ride... a first concert – and the reason these firsts are special is because the person experiencing that first thing, whatever it is, is super sensitive to that experience. She must be because she does not know what to expect so in order to react appropriately, she must be ‘on her toes.’ This higher state of awareness is valuable for the workshop leader.

In a workshop leader’s first time leading, she will generally be extra-sensitive to her group because she does not know what to expect from them. This unsteady ground has both beneficial and detrimental qualities. Beneficial qualities for the first time leader include a flexibility in tackling new subject matter and in allowing her workshop group to grow and change. The detrimental qualities are a lack of knowledge in how to handle being ‘in charge,’ giving in to her nervousness slightly, but these negative aspects may readily be overcome with experience. However, too much confidence may turn into arrogance and the workshop structure may become too rigid and students will not benefit as much from the process.

Is any of this backed up by hardcore workshop experts? Why yes it is, though in a round-about fashion. David Gosser and Vicky Roth (2001) offer the reminder that peer leaders are students who have previously done well in the course which they assist with, they are not teachers. “The natural inclination of many new leaders is to fall back into familiar patterns of instruction” (Gosser and Roth, 2001, p. 61). Now this says many new leaders “fall *back* into familiar patterns” so this must mean that brand-new leaders beginning their leading careers in an ideal leading way –that is according to these same authors: “Creating strategies for synthesis, moving from data to structure and mechanism” (Gosser and Roth, 2001, p. 62). So it seems as though an occasional pattern has been noticed where the leader shifts her role from leader to instructor.

This can be both tempting and destructive – a Pandora’s box of misguided intention. Tempting, because the leaders know the material very well and they do genuinely want to help their fellow students understand. Telling the whole group all at once how to do a problem appears to be the best, most efficient way to help; after all, that would free up a large amount of time which may be used better by the students working problems and studying. The difficulty is that first, students may work like this at home and second, workshop leaders are not trained as teachers so although they think they may be explaining a topic clearly and thoroughly, this may not be the case. Even if they do explain things well, they are devaluing themselves as workshop leaders: the more a student puzzles out without the answers fed to him, the more he will comprehend the reason behind the rules he must learn for the subject he is studying.

There is another problem with teaching: “When instructors and TAs are asked, ‘Why are some of your students doing poorly?’ they often answer, ‘Because they don’t seem motivated to study.’” (Roth, Goldstein and Marcus, 2001, p. 44) This is to say that if teaching were adequate, there would not be a place for workshop leaders. To keep the ‘peer’ in peer leader is essential and there is no better way to see the WHY

behind a struggling student than in a small group setting where that student is surrounded by his peers. Teachers can be intimidating, peers are accepting.

Now how is it –really- that first time leaders will have this ‘peeriness’ in greater concentrations than their contemporaries who have more experience?

Well, for one thing, they will most likely be more nervous, and nervousness can be harvested by the group as a wonderful asset. There will be as many different personalities in a workshop as there are people in it and these personalities will most likely run the gamut. Very outspoken students who do not suffer from bashfulness when it comes to asking questions may at least be prevented from fishing for answers if they see their assigned ‘fearless leader’ waver slightly, but those who stand to gain the most are the quieter students. Those who will not raise their hand in class for fear of having a ‘stupid’ question may be less afraid to look to this leader and indeed to their fellow students for help because if their leader is not a “be-all-end-all” then perhaps there is not a “be-all-end-all,” erasing the “stupidness” of any question.

The time that I was proudest of my workshop is a time that I was most ashamed of myself and was completely unprepared. I did not understand the section which we were supposed to cover that day, and I never had – not even when I was in the class which my workshop students were now taking. I came in and told them that I could not be a workshop leader that day because I did not know how to do the problems. I sat down with the students and we all agreed to work out a specific problem. The extroverts of the group became slightly lost with no one to look to for advice and a very evenly-spread networking began in a way that I had never seen in the group. If a quieter person was not offering anything to the process his opinion was definitely requested by someone else. After that day the group remained more cohesive.

The other, more obvious way that a first time leader will be more peer-like than his more experienced leaders is that he will probably have finished the course which he is now a leader for, that is, more recently than other leaders. This means that the struggles he had with the material will be fresher in his mind and not only will he be able to relate to his students more but he will be able to compare subjects in a more comprehensive fashion. Roth, Goldstein and Marcus (2001) urge leaders to “*Use your own experience as a guide.* What helped you understand the difficult concepts of the course?” This will come more naturally to the new leader precisely because he has just learned it. An experienced leader may know a good deal about a subject but has a higher risk of ignoring the reasons behind the facts.

The workshop I led was for a general chemistry class. When I was in the lecture class I remember being mystified by strong and weak acids and bases. I did not really learn the reason behind what makes an acid strong until I took organic chemistry which I had just finished. So this specific topic was quite fresh for me. I posed the question to my workshop, “What determines the strength of an acid or base?” and sure enough, no one could tell me. I had brought my molecular model set with me because that is finally what made me understand the Bronstead-Lowery acid system, so I made models of a few acids of varying strengths and passed them around. The group had a very quick conversation and within a few minutes, everyone could tell *why* those strong acids and bases are strong.

On the whole, I made sure that the first workshop group I led was malleable. For every activity we worked through to reach some of the students, others would seem to disengage which forced many different angles of attack on our first semester chemistry. The entire group certainly must have benefited from such behavior. Is this necessarily unique to my workshop or even to first time workshop leaders? No, certainly not, anyone may lead in such a way and be even more effective. What first-timers bring to the table is a sensitivity and an

excitement for something new which makes flexibility a more viable option. That point of view will generally shift with time, as the leaders become used to leading, used to students looking up to them, they feel more “teacher-y” and are more susceptible to falling into that role.

Workshop leaders need to continually learn from their students. After all, peer leaders are students themselves, and if they become students of their workshop groups then every semester they will have new lessons. This new lesson, this new group, may keep them more open to flexible group structure, communication, and sensitivity toward their role, as they must learn from and about their students.

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References

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