

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING AND TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL – A LETTER

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I spent the past year as a Grade 9 IPC (Integrated Physics & Chemistry) and Grade 11 Chemistry teacher at an El Paso, Texas, high school. After graduating from college, I thought it would be fun and exciting to teach high school science before going on to pursue my graduate studies. Unfortunately, I found the job to be much more challenging than I initially thought. If it had not been for my experience as an undergraduate Peer Leader, I would not have been able to make it through the school year.

Considering that my degree is in Chemistry and not Education, I chose to get my probationary teaching certificate through Texas Alternative Certification Process (ACP). I needed a fast track option to getting a probationary license and the only true requirements at Texas ACP is that you have the appropriate college credits and enough money to pay the fees. The program is also very flexible about attending their night classes so long as these are completed within one year of entrance to the program.

I originally applied and was hired solely to teach Chemistry. Much to my dismay, my course assignment was completely changed at the beginning of the school year. For some unexplained reason, the administration decided to give me a full load of freshmen IPC and assign my Chemistry classes to another new hire whose background was in Outdoor Education and Geology. Upon approaching the administrator in charge of curriculum, he noted my protest as valid and told me to keep it in mind for the following school year. After some discussion with both the science department chair and the principal, I was able to switch out two IPC classes for Chemistry.

The three new science teachers, two others and I, were assigned to a wing separate from the main building and the main science hall. From the start we were isolated from the established science teachers. The only resources given to us at the beginning of the school year was a curriculum CD detailing the order in which specific topics should be covered and the teacher's edition of the classroom textbook. From the start, the department chair told us that "you are essentially on your own." During my year as a teacher, I spent more time working on notes, worksheets, and lesson plans for both IPC and Chemistry than I ever did as an undergraduate with my homework.

The only thing that saved me from quitting at the beginning was my tenure as a Peer Leader. Peer leading was absolutely critical to my success because it taught me the basics I needed as an educator. As a Peer Leader, one learns how to conduct oneself in front of a class, present lessons and ideas, lead discussion, ask questions that require thought, and develop a teaching style. Although General Chemistry workshop is very open and is neither recitation nor lecture, the Peer Leader is still an educational guide to a group of students going through a journey.

What is unique about workshop, and really helped me as an educator, is the fact that each Peer Leader is required to ‘own’ the material if they are to present it successfully to their students. Although given the topics to be covered in workshop each week during our meeting, the Peer Leaders were required to determine how they would personally cover the material in class. Giving the Peer Leaders the liberty and freedom of presenting the material meant two things: we had to have real knowledge of the subject and we had to develop a successful means of conveying the information to the students. Unlike my experience as a teacher, Peer Leaders were always willing to share with each other their ideas and strategies that proved both successful and unsuccessful in their workshops.

No two workshops or group of students was ever the same. Strategies that may have worked in one class would sometimes fail miserably in others. Being a Peer Leader teaches one to learn how to gauge a group of students and find the methods that work best for them. Such a skill was invaluable to me considering the dynamics vary so much from class to class at a high school level. Also, a Peer Leader has to learn how to motivate a class to learn. Since nearly no grade school student wishes to be in class, motivating them to learn or actively engage in the process is perhaps the greatest challenge a teacher faces.

The biggest shame is that peer-led workshops are limited only to General Chemistry at the University of Texas at El Paso. I believe many other students would benefit from having something similar in other classes considered to be challenging. I know for certain the College of Engineering and the Math Department should take a page from your book and implement a program to help their students through the introductory courses. The biggest problem that students face is a lack of guidance and help in those classes because large class sizes mitigate interaction with the professor and Teaching Assistants.

After having to take Introductory Computer Science for majors (Comp. Sci. 1411) due to scheduling, I know first-hand what challenges computer science majors face. In lecture, we would learn nothing but theory and principles behind programming. We would then somehow be expected to put it all into practice during the lab component and compose a functioning program. Despite having a very helpful TA, he was not always available due to the size of the class and other constraints. It would have been great if we had had a small workshop with an undergraduate Peer Leader who could have bridged the gap between theory and implementation.

The one thing that Peer Leading did not prepare me for was how to discipline a class. Leading a class at a college level and at a high school level are night and day when it comes to maturity and behavioral problems. Teaching four freshmen classes at the high school showed me the immense challenge that teachers face every day when it comes to trying to get a group of students to learn. So much time is spent in the classroom making sure that the students are on task, not goofing around, are learning, and not harassing one another.

Fortunately, several teachers advised me from the beginning that one has to set firm classroom rules and enforce them regularly. The students need boundaries; otherwise they will run amok or take over the classroom. I quickly learned to be firm but flexible and to try to never take anything personally. My colleague down the hall was unfortunate in that he wanted to create a ‘fun’ learning environment from the start which caused the students to assume that meant neither work nor study, nor self-control, was ever necessary.

The problem is that too much time is devoted to “in-service” training sessions that are supposed to help teachers in their pedagogy. Yet, all the instructional strategies that are taught fall flat because they work best in theoretical classroom settings where time with the students is unlimited, the class size is small, and the Peer-Led Team Learning – Implementation in High Schools: Peer-Led Team Learning and teaching high school-a letter. A. Skye Fortier – 2012, www.pltlis.org

students are actively participating. Hardly anytime is ever spent on how to deal with students with behavioral problems or those students who frequently cause interruptions. The worst part is that it is nearly impossible to have ‘problem’ students, who clearly do not want to be there, removed from class for any good length of time.

A lot of time, energy, and money are dedicated to make sure that ‘everyone’ is incorporated in the learning process. Instead, those students who wish to learn are being held back by those who do not. School is no longer about learning but has become what students ‘feel’ like learning. The educational system that is in place today in America is outdated and obsolete. So many parents are no longer involved in the education of their children and instead use school and teachers as baby sitters for their kids. Teachers are not respected as professionals by many of the students, parents, or the community at large. The educational system in this country needs a revolution, and I fear it will not change until it collapses upon itself.

While I was at the high school, I tried to use the joy I had being a Peer Leader and bring that into my classroom. With all the challenges that face a first-year teacher and beyond, it is incredibly difficult to always keep one’s spirits high. It is no wonder that the teacher turnover rate in science is so high. I want to personally thank you, Dr. Becvar, for taking such a personal interest in science education. We need more people like you who desire to make a positive change in the way students learn and the way teachers instruct them.

Editor’s note: This letter was written to Dr. James Becvar, Professor of Chemistry, University of Texas, El Paso, TX by A. Skye Fortier, former Peer Leader in Chemistry at UTEP

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