

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

PLTL AND SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHING

LEO GAFNEY

The following is an excerpt from a telephone interview conducted by Leo Gafney as part of the study of former peer leaders at St. Xavier University in Chicago. It provides a dramatic illustration of how the peer leader experience inspired Yvonne O'Connell in her work as a secondary school teacher at a private school for boys.

Leo: I am following up on the survey that you completed. I noticed that you are teaching in high school and you felt that the workshops were a factor in your decision to go into teaching. You also said that you use workshop skills as you teach.

Yvonne: Yes. The workshops allowed me to see how much influence you can have on people. I had workshops in Organic Chemistry and the students came to them a little scared. And it amazed me how your attitudes as a workshop leader can give them confidence and make the experience positive. I'll be teaching chemistry next year. I will definitely use the workshop approach. I don't give them answers, I ask them questions and it gives them a lot of confidence. I work with some kids in the general track who were not taught what they need for high school, and they are constantly playing catch up; and they lack confidence. Workshops gave me the experience to tell them, "You are capable of learning anything. It's in your hands, and I will guide you." I've had parents come to me and say, "my child hated math, he never passed it. Now he studies every day. He is willing to open the book, and spend the time on it." And now these kids are getting B's. During the football season I had the coach come into my afterschool class and pull the kids out because they didn't want to leave. They are developing confidence that they never had, and I really think workshops had a lot to do with that; showing me how to build them up by asking questions, not by handing them answers. When they come up with the answers I don't think they realize I am leading. They just think, 'Hey, it's in there and I know this. I'm smarter than I thought.' It's phenomenal. They come on a voluntary basis to see me after school. They come during a free period and basically what I do is run a mini-workshop.

Leo: Answers have been an issue within the workshop group. The chemists are firm believers in not giving answers. But some of those in other disciplines want to give answers to the leaders.

Yvonne: But then they are selecting poor leaders. I think workshops work because you are using them at a time when students are feeling vulnerable and that they are not capable, and the whole point of building confidence and having them learning more and feel good about it is that they can do it on their own, that it is in there and this person is just helping them bring it out. Students don't see it as leading questions. They feel that it is in them. I see it in my students.

One student's father is a teacher and he walked into my classroom and said, "I realize my son will fail, he will go to summer school. I don't have high expectations for him, therefore I'm not expecting much from you." And I'm thinking, "You're a teacher." I can't believe he said that.

Students rise to the expectations that you have, and I expect a lot. I sat down with this student and said, "This is my expectation and you will meet it; there is no option. I will help you meet it because that's my job." And just by giving him questions and guidance--he beams now. He walks into my classroom like he's a big man on campus. I mean he knows his stuff. And that's because of confidence; he came up with those answers on his own. In my class of students with special-needs I sometimes find that some students don't have that inner place that tells them what's the next thing they need to know: "Okay, I know this; now what do I need to know?" And workshops help them to think this way.

Once a week I have one of my students hold the class. They are 'teacher for the day.' And it's amazing, not only how much confidence it builds in that student, but the others really listen; they are glued to him. They respect him, they don't disturb the class. Kids who are a problem for me are perfectly quiet.

Leo: So you are using the workshop techniques.

Yvonne: Definitely. I would say workshops have an impact on about half of what I do in the class, and all of my reviews at the school have said, 'It's obvious you will never settle for mediocrity, and your students will rise to that.' And they have. The school has gotten calls from parents saying, "I can't believe how you have inspired my kid," and it's not that I inspire them; it's their confidence; they inspire each other. When they are 'teacher for the day' they feel empowered by it. I love to see them starting to ask the leading questions. And they don't even know they are doing it.

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