

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION

WHAT IF A CRITICAL COMPONENT IS MISSING? REVIEWING THE PLTL MODEL

LEO GAFNEY

Since the six critical components were developed and described to form a model through which Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) can be implemented, we have noted that each of these elements plays an important role leading to overall success. Conversely, when any one of the critical components is missing, the likelihood of success is greatly diminished. Site visits, WPA reports, and surveys have repeatedly illustrated how the program tends to break down when even one component is missing or not fully in place. But in analyzing the experiences of successful implementers we do find that we must reexamine and perhaps revise elements of the model in the light of practice.

1. Integral to the Course

With regard to attendance, three approaches have emerged: (1) All students from a PLTL section are required to attend; (2) students make the decision at the start of the semester, and if they choose the workshops they must attend; (3) students may drop in on a week- to-week basis. The model recommends the first approach with participation by all, but in this case leaders must sometimes work hard to engage those who are less motivated. The third approach, drop-in sessions, generally fail to provide continuity and real problem-solving experiences. Many sites have selected the second approach, namely to implement PLTL with those students who elect to participate—usually 30% to 60%. This is done either for lack of resources—financial, personnel for leaders, space; or, as mentioned, because of the belief or experience that not all students will profit from the workshops. Many sites have had success with this approach—in terms of student performance and overall satisfaction with implementation.

2. Involvement of the Professor

The PLTL model recommends that the professor teaching the course participate in the implementation of workshops, for example, in the selection and preparation of materials, and in the training and supervision of leaders—meeting with them each week. This approach provides links among the students, workshop leaders, and professors, and tends to make the workshop a more significant learning experience. Some sites, to economize or because some faculty are more ready and willing to supervise the leaders, have arranged for the leaders of several sections with different professors be trained and supervised by one professor, sometimes assisted by an experienced leader. In these cases, the less-involved lecturers tend to view the workshops as useful but not critical to students' success, and when the workshops are threatened such lecturers are less likely to champion PLTL.

3. Training of Leaders

The role of the peer leader distinguishes PLTL from other programs such as Supplemental Instruction, recitations, group study, and tutoring. The leaders are trained to see themselves not as teachers but as important facilitators of learning, working closely with the professor—becoming strong guides in the discipline and also advocates for the students. Learning and performing this role requires that leaders be carefully selected, and provided with training — weekly supervision that covers the material students are learning, pedagogical and group processing strategies, and the practical skills to handle people problems. While this need is made clear to new adopters, scheduling problems, professorial commitments, or a lack of conviction about the importance of on-going supervision leads PLTL programs to reduce the emphasis on weekly meetings, or hold meetings that leaders do not attend. The sense of a unified program is then lost. Each workshop depends on the skill, commitments, and industry of its leader. The leaders themselves lose their sense of belonging to a significant enterprise. Ultimately, the foundations of the program become so weak that continuance is problematic. Abandoning weekly leader meetings has been, in a number of cases, the preamble to abandonment of the program.

4. Appropriately Challenging Materials

The model recommends materials that are challenging but doable, and appropriate for group work. The availability of ready-made materials published by Prentice Hall has made implementation of PLTL in General and Organic Chemistry somewhat easier than in other disciplines. But a majority of those using workshops make significant adaptations in order for the materials to fit the pace, emphasis, conceptual level, text- book approach, and other variables in the course. Students are quick to recognize it when workshop materials are not closely connected to the lecture and textbook. In addition, they are particularly bothered when the workshops do not seem to prepare them for tests. This expectation sometimes creates problems because most professors do not want the workshops to be simply drill and practice for tests. But instructors generally appreciate students' desires to improve their grades on the basis of workshop participation, and develop materials that develop concepts and enhance skills, along with abilities in creative problem solving.

5. Organizational Arrangements

The time recommended for workshops is two hours. Ninety minutes can work, but when workshops are only an hour, there are generally complaints that students cannot spend the time on protracted problem-solving that is intended to be a key workshop experience, and the leaders find it difficult to keep up with the full reinforcement of the lecture material. At a number of sites, workshops have been scheduled with students from several lecture sections. This can work, but there are frequent complaints that the pace, emphasis, and manner of explanation can vary considerably from one section to another, making the workshops less effective.

The size of six to eight students in a group has been repeatedly emphasized. With fewer students, it is often difficult to develop group spirit; with ten or more it is difficult for a leader to keep in close contact with individuals and small groups as they work.

6. Administrative Support

Although professors are free to select much of what constitutes a course—textbooks, material and format for tests, lecturing methods, etc.—introducing workshops requires approval, funding, and logistical support from another level, that of department chair, dean, and sometimes higher. When this support is strong, and the other components are in place, PLTL workshops stand a good chance of succeeding. When administrative support is weak, professors implementing the program feel they must struggle and beg for the necessities of implementation. Most administrators are in favor of more creative approaches to teaching and learning yet they are sometimes not able or willing to make the extra effort needed to obtain funding or fit workshops into the program of studies. The success or failure of PLTL is found in the details.

*Leo Gafney
Project Evaluator*

Cite This Article as: Gafney, L. (2012). What If a Critical Component is Missing? Reviewing the PLTL Model. Peer-Led Team Learning: Implementation. Online at <http://www.pltlis.org>. Originally published in *Progressions: The Peer-Led Team Learning Project Newsletter*, Volume 5, Number 4, Summer 2004.