

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION

THE LEARNING SPECIALIST'S PERSPECTIVE: PLTL WORKSHOPS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC

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The Peer-Led Team Learning workshops began at the University of the Pacific in 1996. As the University's Learning Specialist, I was first approached by Organic Chemistry Professor Don Wedegaertner who had gained first-hand experience with PLTL while on a 1995-96 sabbatical at the University of Rochester with Professor Jack Kampmeier. He asked me to team up with him to help train the workshop leaders. From the perspective of a Learning Specialist, it has been exciting to watch the program develop. What has been most exciting, in recent years, has been seeing the other Organic Chemistry professors sign onto the project. Not only do they have PLTL groups in their sections of Organic Chemistry, but the professors also participate in the weekly training seminars.

As the Learning Specialist on a small campus, I am also involved in other peer-learning models on our campus. However, the PLTL model is the strongest for several reasons: It has paired training with the content-area professors and the Learning Specialist; there is a regular, weekly, structured training seminar; problem sets are provided to the workshop leaders by the professors (along with weekly training); and there is excellent collaboration/coordination between/among the Chemistry professors.

Recent improvements in the program include the participation of all the Organic Chemistry professors in our workshop leader training sessions. We have also begun using on-line logs and attendance reports (a direct result of Dr. Andreas Franz's attending the Montana conference in August 2002), which conveniently provide me and the faculty instant feedback on the Workshop sessions. This has been a significant improvement over the written logs used in the past, when our workshop leaders either refused ("forgot") to turn in their written logs, or they would turn them in at the last minute, which did not give the trainers any time for feedback and, thus, defeated the whole purpose.

We have had excellent luck utilizing several training techniques on our campus. First, we offer course credit for the weekly training seminars (although students tell us it's not so much the credit they crave, it's what goes on their transcripts and resumes; the same can be said for what we pay the workshop leaders—they prefer the experience and what goes on their resumes and transcripts.) Our first few training sessions by the Learning Specialist typically cover topics such as learning styles, group process, seating arrangements in groups, discussion formats, and ethics as workshop leaders. Each workshop leader presents a reflective teaching session some time during the training seminar, here there is a safe environment for them to practice their workshop methods, receive some feedback, and reflect on how things went. Weekly feedback to the workshop leaders from all the

professors on their e-logs is extremely helpful and can now be done on a regular basis. And poster sessions at the end of the training seminar provide workshop leaders with a way to share information learned in the seminar.

Regular anonymous feedback can be achieved either weekly, or every other week in the training sessions through the use of “entrance slips” in the training sessions, then discussed with the workshop leaders. This form of feedback is done by handing out half-sheets of paper with open-ended questions or statements, such as “The best thing this week was . . .” or “My worst mistake this week was . . .” We opened this line of communication the first day of our training session with the open-ended statement, “I’m worried about . . .” With fifteen workshop leaders in the room, they were all amazed to learn that most shared the same fears—that they might not teach their students anything, or that they wouldn’t know the answers to some of the problems, or that they might appear stupid to their students. By discussing these anonymous entrance slips and responses in a safe environment, shared fears, shared experiences, and shared triumphs are explored and illuminated.

The benefits of the workshops, naturally, have been better grades and increased knowledge for the students enrolled in the Organic Chemistry classes; benefits to the workshop leaders in the form of leadership development, teaching experience, organization, and a better job than bussing dishes; to the Chemistry Department, which have teamed up and collaborated in these efforts. It provides a model for the rest of the campus for other peer-led efforts.

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