

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

ENHANCING THE TRAINING OF PEER LEADERS: FOUNDATIONS AND INNOVATIONS

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The Faculty Viewpoints

Peer leaders need training in both the content material and in the pedagogy. Most of the training attention thus far has been focused on pedagogy, presumably because that is a more general topic; the subject matter is obviously different for every course, while most teaching methods can be applied in a wide variety of contexts. Yet, although peer leaders are typically upper division students who have done well in the course before, my experience has been that they do need added training in the technical details. And although the specifics (and therefore the details of the training) differ from course to course, there may be some generally applicable approaches that make for more effective content training. I would welcome a discussion of these possibilities.

Peer leaders also need ongoing training in teaching methodology, which has indeed been addressed in the literature, but on many campuses the training is often concentrated during a brief period at the beginning of a school year. This is a start, but ongoing training is also needed during their involvement, as they encounter new questions and new situations so that the training is immediately in context. The greatest problem in achieving this ongoing training, and with providing training in both content and pedagogy, is time. Time is in short supply for both the peer leaders and the faculty, and schedules often make it difficult to coordinate additional meetings during the school year.

From an institutional point of view, training also poses an added financial problem. It is already difficult to adequately fund peer leaders, at least if peer leading is a paid position as it often is. Paying for additional time for training is even more difficult. I do not have any simple answers to these barriers. One way to provide some support would be to compile discussions of typical difficulties that might be expected, and effective strategies for addressing these problems. Adding these to the existing collection of workshop materials would at least save the faculty some development time for training, and the materials can be made available to peer leaders as an added resource that they can access as they need it.

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As a PLTL novice, I found the area of leader training daunting, in part because I recognized the importance of this component of the model. I had the good fortune of making the acquaintance of Dr. Dennis Bartow, who not only came onsite to present information workshops for prospective faculty and workshop leaders, but offered to return to conduct training. An unexpected move prevented him from doing so, but this became a blessing in disguise, since it led to my attendance at the City College of New York orientation for workshop leaders. I received institutional funding to travel to the “epicenter of PLTL,” and returned armed with knowledge, materials, and energy that I applied to construct my own training program!

Since the quality of leader training is critical to the success of the program, it would be very helpful for experts to provide either onsite or remote training to either leaders, faculty, learning specialists, or any combination of these. The website already has a wealth of information that could help identify potential trainers, and perhaps additional names could be added to this list, sorted by region. The newsletter is another possible method for disseminating this information. Travel funding could be a barrier, but likely not a significant one if regional trainers are cultivated. Trained trainers would continue to increase the pool. As we all know, reading about and implementing programs tend to be as different as night and day, and providing training support may well tip the scales for institutions that are considering PLTL pilot programs.

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PLTL could be developed in the area of leader training by having much more extensive exposure of new leaders to model workshops. This could be accomplished by one or more of the following methods:

- (a) Partnerships whereby institutions newly adopting PLTL could be paired with nearby institutions with established PLTL programs. New leaders could visit the workshops at the institution with an established program. Also leader trainers from the established institution could visit the new institution.
- (b) A cadre of professional leader trainers could visit PLTL institutions, both new and established, and conduct leader training programs.
- (c) A set of training videos could be developed. I have seen several videos featuring workshops but essentially they are all “public relations” efforts. They extol workshops but show very little of what goes into making a successful workshop program. Much more useful for leader training would be videos that show more than just snatches of workshops in progress. There should be a narrative voiceover that does the following:
 - i) points out techniques leaders are using,
 - ii) comments on situations that leaders are handling,
 - iii) shows other leaders handling the same or a similar situation differently,
 - iv) discusses the pros and cons of the different leader strategies,

v) describes how the leader is or is not following the PLTL model,

vi) carefully explains how the workshop shown in the video applies constructivist theories of learning, how the students are being led to use metacognition, and other ways in which the PLTL workshop model fits into learning theory and accommodates various learning styles.

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After six years of implementation of Peer Led Team Learning at the University of Portland, we have developed a training manual that works well for an integrated training session of biology and chemistry peer leaders. This combined training session is scheduled for the first Friday afternoon and Saturday morning during the Fall semester. For us, this corresponds to Labor Day weekend but is the best time for us to schedule this so that new peer leaders are ready when their workshops start.

The material in the manual is structured so that the first day addresses various approaches to group work and theories of learning and learning styles. The first day concludes with an assignment for each participant to determine his or her learning style from a web site provided and to bring it for the second day session.

The second day begins with the students displaying their learning styles on bar graphs on the board. The diversity of learning styles within the group of peer leaders is discussed. The groups are further split into discipline-specific groups and work on introducing concepts in biology or chemistry using approaches that are other than their “preferred” learning style. In our training session this Fall, this resulted in some very humorous and creative kinesthetic examples. The session concludes with a panel made up of experienced peer leaders who answer questions submitted by the participants. Assessments of the training sessions have consistently found the panel very popular and helpful. The afternoon on the second day is reserved for breakout sessions with individual instructors and their peer leaders.

The manual that we have developed is available on the PLTLIS website (under Leader Training). We would welcome any improvements that users may suggest.

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The Peer Leaders' Viewpoints

The PLTL model, being adopted by many colleges and universities, and enjoyed by a majority of students, still lacks faculty involvement. Many professors refuse to come to the workshop preparation meetings, saying that they don't have time for it. Not knowing exactly what the professor expects students to know, the leaders are getting discouraged and lose the motivation in solving the problems. Leaders tell me sometimes: “There are so many subtopics in the book, we are not sure if the professor wants students to know all of them or if he is skipping some. There is no point to struggle in the workshop if he is not covering it in the lecture anyway.” I just want the professors to

know that 30 minutes a week that they spend in the workshop prep will benefit both leaders and students, and will definitely increase the overall level of performance in the workshop and on an exam.

This semester we actually made many significant changes to the Leader Training routine. Besides the Education class that new leaders take during the first semester that they lead a workshop, they are exchanging ideas and concerns with the experienced leaders during the workshop prep. Also, I asked the coordinators to start looking for possible candidates for the coordinator position. I would like to start training future coordinators before they take the job, because I want them to be prepared and ready for the challenges of being a workshop coordinator.

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I am a new peer leader this year, so my point of view probably differs from the experiences of the other older fellow peer workshop leaders. I can say that at the moment I am still feeling lost sometimes and I would need also some additional sources that would help me to lead the group and to understand the students.

So far I have found that the weekly meetings of the workshops leaders are really helpful. However I would appreciate if each of the meetings had a separate topic to discuss, for example, dealing with shy students, having authority or motivation. In my class I think that we just spend too much time talking about how the last session went and I do not gain too much from that. I also found out that other people's experiences help me the most.

I would also suggest a special format of meetings where students would meet separately and discuss the material covered in the workshop book. That approach would help leaders to find out their weak spots in their knowledge. I think that leaders should solve their problems first in the peer workshop book by themselves and then compare their answers. That would prevent the leaders from making too many mistakes while working with the group of students.

On the other hand, I also think that much more can be done to improve the communication between the leaders. I found out that the leaders do not know each other very well and that they do not communicate very much outside of the weekly meetings. I think that the best way to solve that problem would be finding out what the students have in common. For example we could be having dinner sometimes or go to the cinema together.

I liked that our teacher passed out the sheet of paper with phone numbers. Sometimes when I have a need to talk about current issues that arise in my workshop, I can give a call to one of the leaders. That helps me solve the current problems in the workshop and talk about my feelings and attitudes. I think that it is a generally good idea to have somebody to contact when the need arises. I would suggest having a special web page where peer workshop leaders could be asking questions and the other workshop leaders and teachers would be answering them.

Finally, I think that workshop is a really good idea. It has helped me a lot in my own classes. I started to like group working in my own classes because it is a great opportunity to learn from other classmates. I started to understand that every student sometimes struggles with classes. For me it is very important to ask for help when a concept is unclear or if I do not know how to do a problem. The workshop is a real life experience where both leaders and their students can benefit.

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