

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## REFLECTIONS ON TRAINING PEER LEADERS

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*The first conference on Training Peer Leaders, held at the University of Rochester (UR), Rochester, NY, June 18-20, 2000, was organized by Vicki Roth, Assistant Dean, with able assistance from Nirmala Fernandes and Lydia Tien, both Academic Support Coordinators, and Avista Ayub, Sara Eleoff, and Hassan Jamil, UR Workshop Coordinators. Jack Kampmeier, PLTL Project Co-Principal Investigator, provided direction and support. The conference was sponsored by the Peer-Led Team Learning Workshop Project and the University of Rochester Learning Assistance Services.*

*Participants were asked to respond to two questions: 1) What was the best learning experience you had, and why? And 2) What are you ready to do now?*

The "hands-on" examples provided fantastic explanations/justifications for what peer leader training sessions should include. In particular:

--Vicki's [Roth] music metaphor was a gentle, yet powerful, way to begin a discussion of the strength inherent in diversity;

--the concept map exercise (water cycle) really demonstrated concretely how different individuals function in a group in ways that reflect their learning styles. It also opened a window into how the concept map exercise itself is a powerful tool for generating discussion in a workshop group;

--the pair problem-solving exercise revealed a few important insights. First, we all (academics in particular, I think) need to develop critical LISTENING skills. Second is that what is most valuable to foster in students is a self-awareness of how they solve problems--NOT necessarily whether they get the right answer.

Another response to the first question is one that may be a *cliche* and obvious. But as one who hasn't attended a conference outside my scientific discipline before, I feel so strongly about it that I'm going to write it anyway: Interacting with such dedicated and caring colleagues to pursue our common goals not only filled my mind with ideas about how to develop a peer tutor training program, but also filled my heart with the excitement, enthusiasm and energy to put them into action. My thanks to both organizers and attendees for the personal growth opportunity.

I came to Rochester with the general notion that training peer leaders was a good idea. I left doubly convinced of this, and with a vision of how to put it into practice on my campus:

--understanding the importance of the relationship between content and learning experts, I'm ready to seek out those with learning expertise on my campus;

--talking with a variety of learning specialists at this conference and discovering all of the niches/titles they hold at their respective colleges, I gained a good sense of where to look for their peers at my institution;

--I'm ready to present/promote the peer learning model to individuals and organizations on my campus (like the Teaching Academy, and the Center for Biology Education), and seek colleagues to help put a structure in place for facilitating the development of peer mentoring programs;

--I'm ready to develop a WPA proposal, both to stimulate the initiation of peer tutoring in my classroom, and also to maintain a connection to the wonderful group associated with the Workshop Project whom I met this past weekend.

*Kevin T. Strang  
Department of Physiology  
University of Wisconsin*

The best learning experience were the activities. I especially remember the pair-sharing problem solver and listener, the musical cultural diversity activity, the concept map group activity, and the pipe cleaner activity. The hands-on helps us remember and thus actually use in the future. The second best thing I took home were the handouts and green books...great, detailed information!

Here's what I am doing....I recopied my notes and organized all the material into a notebook (what kind of learner am I?). I made an appointment with two Organic faculty to bring them up to date on Workshop and to see if they decide to proceed. The one thing I will not do is to do this for them; it needs to be a joint effort.

Some areas that I felt were lacking are problems or mechanical issues such as getting the students to attend I fit is mandatory (this is a professor issue so I won't worry about it). Also, the one area I feel the workshop is weak in is evaluation. I do much more in that area with Supplemental Instruction (SI) leaders through observations, surveys, data gathering. This may be an area you all will explore and expand in the future.

*Barbara M. Stout  
Supplemental Instruction Specialist  
Learning Skills Center  
The University of Pittsburgh*

The best learning experience and why? This is difficult to answer, mostly because there were so many different learning experiences - I guess that means that I still have a lot to learn! If I had to choose one general area, it would be the sessions that focused on learning styles, developmental theory and problem-solving. I find it very useful to think about all of these at the same time, especially when I

am writing materials for a workshop, and when I am talking with peer leaders. I will definitely use much of what we discussed in my classes and in the leader training course.

For example, I plan to administer a learning style inventory, such as [David] Kolb's, to my leaders and then do a series of selected workshop problems to reinforce in their minds how the problems may be geared to different learning styles. I will also do this in my upper-level chemistry courses and then talk with the classes about how they can maximize their learning by being aware of their learning styles (I'll probably pre- and post-test them even).

In addition to what I wrote above, I am much more prepared to sit down and talk with our learning specialist (actually probably a committee of several people) about the training course. A very nice part of what happened at the conference was the sense of ownership it has given the student leaders who attended. When we talked about what to do when we returned to CCU, they basically took over, and will play a large part of our leader training.

*Brian Gilbert  
Department of Chemistry and Physics  
Coastal Carolina University*

I have to classify the group activities as the best experience I had. I enjoyed working in groups, which is surprising considering how much I hated it when I was an undergraduate...I was one of those standoffish students who thought they knew what was going on better than everyone else. I think it is important for the faculty and learning specialists to experience the same social interaction and team building that we ask our leaders and students to go through. I especially liked the concept-mapping exercise, and I see very clearly how such exercises can be used to encourage students to take active control over their learning processes.

I am much better prepared to run an effective peer leader training program than I was before. I realize now just how important it is to train leaders in learning styles, people-management skills, teamwork and diversity so they can cultivate these properties in the students we ask them to lead. I am also better able to persuade my less enthusiastic colleagues with the argument that the time I spend on my leaders produces better-prepared majors who are more confident in their own abilities and who are able to speak eloquently about their knowledge and experience.

*Michael J. Shaw  
Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville*

I thought the conference was terrific! I have been coordinating a version of a workshop program (albeit a twisted one that barely qualifies!) for several years, and I have always felt alone. I have faculty support, which is incredibly important, but I have had no guidance. In fact, I was not aware that the Workshop Model even existed as such, much less that it was born in Chemistry, my own stomping ground! The *Training Peer Leaders* conference in Rochester provided an instant guidance fix! To come across so much information, (not simply stimulating but immediately relevant!) compacted into three days, was thrilling and exhausting. I came home excited and motivated, but now I feel overwhelmed with possibilities. I don't know what to do first: formalize a training program for the leaders? Consider the selection process? Expand my workshop program to include organic chemistry?

Tackle the room shortage? All avenues are appealing but each is a hefty project, boasting its own obstacles. And those questions don't confront the immediate: should I write a grant proposal? Should I call a faculty meeting? Should I set out in search of the right learning specialist? In an ideal world where I can dedicate all my time to promoting the Workshop Model, the answer to all is "yes!" But alas... I do not mean to be complaining, but to be sharing.

One of the benefits of participating in the conference was the sharing -- experiences, visions, realities, successes and failures. I came away from the conference not only with valuable tools and techniques for training peer leaders... not only with handy problem sets (Thanks Jack!)... but also with a sense of community. Community provides validation of one's efforts, which yields the confidence to forge ahead. The enthusiasm with which the participants infected one another rivaled the sense of commitment of the Project emanating from the coordinators. It sounds corny, but it was truly a pleasure to be there. I learned a lot, and the company was top notch. It was also a pleasure to find the George Eastman House! Not to mention the *Midnight Ramblers*! Thanks for everything, I hope the enthusiasm I enjoyed at the conference is generating lots of positive feedback. I will be in touch as I proceed -- it is tough to give this project the time it deserves.

*Julie Kaplan  
Chemistry Department  
New York University*

My best learning experiences: Vicki Roth's Diversity D.J! I felt this exercise really hit home. It is a great introduction into the topic of diversity because it initially gives people a more comfortable context to discuss diversity issues in that of music. This was a real (vs. something more far-fetched) example and I greatly enjoyed the discussion it fostered. This is a fabulous take-home activity for leader weekly meetings. I also liked the newspaper headlines as a topic of discussion.

Linda Dixon's presentation was awesome as well. I took away many hands-on activities that could be incorporated into leader training and I benefited from her discussion of Group Behaviors. The active involvement of conference participants was wonderful.

I also enjoyed Lydia Tien's presentation of thinking and problem-solving strategies. I gained insight from the 4-step process she presented -- 1. Understand the problem; 2. establish a plan; 3. implement a strategy; and 4. evaluate progress. Her comment that students spend most of their time implementing a strategy and that leaders should help to balance their group's focus among all four steps really hit home.

I am now more prepared to further develop the leader training program and incorporate more activities (those of Vicki Roth and Linda Dixon) into our weekly meetings. I also feel that I have more resources to share with my students about the problem-solving process and categories of group behaviors.

Topics I would like to see in future conferences include:

- how to facilitate and make the most of interactions between first-time leaders and leaders who come back to lead a second time.

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- the nuts and bolts of role-playing: perhaps to see examples on video and/or take part in a role playing exercise. How do you organize role playing and make it REAL so that the students are willing and interested in participating in this exercise?
- a timeline of leader training: when should certain topics be presented to leaders, how many workshops should leaders have under their belt before they are ready to think about topics such as learning styles, diversity, etc. or are these topics to be presented before the start of the semester and revisited later?
- and of course, more fun activities to share with workshop leaders! I really enjoyed the conference. Thank you very much!!!!!!

*Melissa Glendening  
Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis*

I enjoyed the Peer Leader conference, specifically learning about the impact a peer leader can have in the learning experience of another peer. Training is the key for a peer leader to be successful in helping another peer. The peer-led model takes a look at all the barriers that prevent learning and focuses on the elements that contribute to learning. The model sets an environment for students to think critically and solve their problems. I think that the PLTL Model is powerful because it looks at learning as a process and gives students the opportunity to take charge of their own learning.

The conference was very organized, focused and informative. I learned a lot from people who ran the workshops and from other people from other colleges. I am thankful for this conference because it gave me a different framework on how to help students academically, specifically in the field of science (chemistry). On a scale of 1-10(10=excellent), I give the conference a 10 for both organization and content.

*Pedro P. Luna  
HEOP Counselor  
Hobart and William Smith Colleges*

I have been tutoring for three years at Queensborough Community College. When I've tutored a student, I have sometimes solved his/her problems for him/her and asked him/her to repeat or to apply my steps to solve similar problems. I wanted my students to get the right answers by repetition. I didn't quite believe that the team effort to solve a problem would work because you are on your own when you take a test in a chemistry class; however, I realize that working in a group, each participant (student) learns different approaches to the same problem as well as cooperation and teamwork.

By learning the new and different methods to solve a problem, students can reexamine their own solutions, and they can make corrections or solidify their methods by explaining to a group. Throughout the workshop, I learned that a group is much more meaningful than just cooperation between participants. A group can accomplish a task which no individual can achieve. I want to consider it as an achievement from group dynamics, since like an organism, a group can do more than its parts. I had a really excellent experience at the University of Rochester.

*HangKyu Park  
Queensborough Community College, CUNY*

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This conference helped me understand biology group tutoring situations in a new way. When another biology tutor and I began to work together, we had to learn how to be a team, but we didn't know what to expect from the students. We thought the only team-work that would happen was between the two of us leaders. We were working with a skeletal model answering student questions after our view. At one point students started answering each others' questions. We didn't know whether this was a good thing or not. After the discussions this weekend, I know this was a good thing. We need to model for students how to ask questions and how to listen and respond to questions. Students learning from each other and helping each other are wonderful ways to show that everyone has information to share. This seems to be the philosophy of P LTL.

*Boris Mullokandov  
Queensborough Community College, CUNY*

This was a wonderful opportunity to interact with intelligent, enthusiastic faculty, committed to supporting student learning. We are in the process of reviewing some of what we learned. We were all impressed by both the quality and quantity of shared information. I was pleased at the inclusion of references to Belenky and Gilligan about women and learning in the literature. Support for women in science is a major concern here [at QBCC]. The one area where I thought more needed to be said (plus an appropriate handout) was in regards to learning disabilities.

It seems possible that some dropouts or non-participants (some of the leaders cited these as problems in their groups) behave the way they do because of frustration related to their disabilities. Aren't these students often the ones who withdraw from group work or who find that time allotments for problem-solving do not fit their personal needs? Can we train leaders in ways to supplement the learning of such students in one-to-one situations, etc? We are planning to have two leaders for each [workshop] session; the second leader will work with individuals who need a modified pace or approaches.

*Hertha Barrack  
Queensborough Community College, CUNY*

I thought this was an excellent conference with quality presentations and lots of good discussion. I have already made the survival kits (Linda Dixon) which I plan to use in conjunction, during my session with students, on "Building Boundaries: Taking Care of Yourself." I also loved the pipe-cleaner a la chenille-sticks activity (Linda Dixon) and Cheryl Rice's session on her training method. I have her book and plan to use parts of it in my training sessions. Ellen Goldstein and AE Dreyfuss (on Learning Styles and Concept Maps) also gave good and useful sessions. The two things that really struck me was that training of student leaders has come into its own, as well as that there are a number of activities and ideas that I can put to immediate use.

*Gretchen Marcus  
Goucher College*

Lyn Isaacson and I just finished the initial training for our peer leaders. I can't imagine how we would have done it without the peer leader training seminar in Rochester this summer. Since this is our first

year doing PLTL, the seminar was a tremendous concrete benefit to us, providing almost all the material for our training session.

In addition, the seminar served to more thoroughly acquaint all of us with the Workshop Model and with each other. In fact, the seminar was the first time that the three of us (chemist, learning specialist, and peer leader) had met as a group. It provided a focused forum for us to exchange ideas and feel comfortable with each other.

I also appreciated the opportunity to meet other people involved with the PLTL Model. I now more fully understand the history and the breadth of its use. The presenters and the organization of the seminar were excellent. All of us from Central enjoyed our time there.

*Louise Zaffiro  
Professor of Chemistry  
Central College  
Pella, Iowa*

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