

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## A WOMAN, A KOREAN, AND A WORKSHOP LEADER

HYE JIN EUM

In 2003 I got a letter from the Peer-Led Team Learning Workshop program at The City College of New York a few days before school started. I opened it right away: The letter said that I was chosen as a candidate to be a Workshop Leader in Chemistry. Of course, my first reaction was not to apply for such a position. Because I come from another country, that's why I cannot speak English fluently. And the main reason is that I hate to show myself up in public. I had never imagined myself talking in front of students in the class.

Let's talk about my culture and character. I am a woman and from Korea. Probably people think what's wrong with me? I definitely think that my gender and ethnicity can be problems to study in American schools. For example, in my culture, students are taught to listen to lecture, sitting up straight. The professors and students do not have a lot of conversation. Professors just teach and students just listen and take notes on what professors say.

For this reason, we do not often spend time having a discussion in the class. Expressing one's thoughts and opinions to a professor is usually considered being impolite toward someone who is senior, especially professors. Furthermore, not talking in public is viewed as a good quality. It is accepted that women should be women: they should be quiet and listen, instead of talking. When I took a sociology class in America, a professor asked me about some topic but all of sudden, I was nervous and I could not come up with anything to say, nor how to organize my thoughts. I was not used to expressing my opinion in public, thus I could not participate in any discussion.

Similarly, it seemed an impossible role to be a Workshop Leader who needs to teach or talk to students logically. Being a leader was not easy for a Korean woman. However, all of sudden, something changed around me. Finally, I decided to go for the interview.

At the interview, six people came together: three interviewers and three candidates. We sat down around a table and one after another, each of us was given questions. I was sweating with nervousness. I guessed people must be laughing at my poor English and behavior. I was so shy and did not have any self-confidence at all. After having this interview, the most serious thing happened to me. It was that I became a Workshop Leader. I expected I would fail the interview and I would feel sympathy for myself, thinking that applying for this position was a courageous action to me.

However, I cannot help being surprised at the result but now it was important to practice. As soon as I arrived home, I practiced for my first day of workshop as though I would practice to address an inauguration. However, when I stood up in front of students in my first workshop session, I was almost frozen, almost dying. I could not say anything that I had prepared. It was much more scary than if I had tried to do Bungee Jump. For the next workshop, I managed to induce students to discuss ways for solving problems. I also practiced my English to express myself clearly.

I'd like to say how this workshop had influenced me both inwardly and outwardly but fortunately, I finished my first workshop successfully instead. Before I became a leader, I did not say anything in the other classes but listened or took notes from lecture. Can you guess how I have been changed in the other classes? I still cannot forget the day when I presented my opinion to a professor and other students and also could not forget the unbearable tension. I started to express my opinion in public as well as in the Leader Training class. I was not an outsider anymore. Professors and classmates were going to recognize me and I found it was a great experience that I expressed my thoughts and opinions in public. I realized that learning while discussing or cooperating has a higher efficiency than learning alone. When I was in Korea, without instruction or hint from the professor, I could not solve the problems. After practicing through workshop, I did not just follow instruction passively but I started solving the problems, cooperating with other people or alone.

In addition, the role of Workshop Leader could encourage my sociability while I discussed with students how to solve the problems. Owing to my culture, I listened patiently to what students thought. These activities improved my sociability and good listening could help me make many friends. All of a sudden, my school life has been totally changed. I have become an active and sociable student.

I believe that the workshop experience can affect not only my school life but also my whole life. I think my change has started from a small opportunity. If I had not gone to the interview or if I had not accepted the workshop position, I would still see myself as a Korean woman who cannot express my opinion in public and cannot cooperate with other people because of a perceived shy and timid personality as an outsider in this society.

Reflected from my experience, I suggest that when you even have a small chance, not to hesitate but to take it, and then make the most of it for yourself. Even small chances can have a strong effect on yourself. If you get a letter from the Peer-Led Team Learning Workshop program at The City College of New York, open the door right now.

**Cite This Article as:** Eum, H.J. (2012). A Woman, a Korean, and a Workshop Leader. Peer-Led Team Learning: Leader Training. Online at <http://www.pltlis.org>. Originally published in *Progressions: The Peer-Led Team Learning Project Newsletter*, Volume 5, Number 4, Summer 2004.