PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING
SUSTAINABILITY

REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCES AS PROGRAM COORDINATOR WITH SLA, SI, AND PLTL AT IUPUI

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My mentoring experience started my second semester of college at Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) when I was asked by my Introductory Psychology professor to be a teacher's assistant. During that year, the campus Bepko Learning Center expanded its recruitment of mentors, many of whom were needed for the large enrollment in Introductory Psychology. In the spring of 2001 I joined the Bepko Learning Center working in a mentoring program called Structured Learning Assistance (SLA). It is one of the three mentoring programs we have on the IUPUI campus

Now as a full-time staff member (2005), I am the Coordinator of Mentoring in Science-Specific Initiatives. It is a humorously long title, very general, but fitting to what I am doing. I assist the mentoring programs we have for science courses and am charged with expanding and improving the success of the existing programs. This position was only recently created to help the programs, so I am the first to take on this title. The Learning Center supports Structured Learning Assistance (SLA) for Introductory Psychology and Biology, as well as the Supplemental Instruction (SI) program for Anatomy, Religion, Physics, Philosophy, Physical Education, Criminal Justice, and Chemistry. All of these courses are introductory. I was familiar with both of these programs, having been part of the Learning Center. When taking on my new position as Coordinator of Mentoring, the program I was unfamiliar with was Peer Led Team Learning (PLTL), which was used in our Principles of Chemistry I course for science and pre-professional majors. This is a three-credit hour course with lecture and a PLTL workshop. It is important to add that the first year Biology courses for SLA are similar to the science major course for Chemistry. Each program (SLA, SI, and PLTL) has the same overall goal of increasing student success, but with separate requirements specific to its needs, discipline, and context.

Some background on SLA and SI programs

Structured Learning Assistance (SLA) started at Ferris State University in Michigan in 1994. It was designed to help increase the number of students passing a course that historically had a high number of high D and F grades and withdrawals. These courses are predominately introductory courses taken by a large population of freshmen directly out of high school. Students seem to find the transition from high school to college difficult and Ferris State felt there needed to be a method to help those students who struggle in their freshman year. These students were deemed "at-risk" and became the focus for such programs as SLA. Students sometimes miss important components of learning that aid in their success in a lecture environment. SLA was created with the belief that on top of content, students need to be taught study skills and learning methods to go along with the content and mentors help with this. IUPUI became one of the four universities

to receive a U.S. Department of Education Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FISPE) grant to start an SLA program in our Learning Center.

Supplementary Instruction (SI) was created by Deanna C. Martin, Ph.D., at the University of Missouri at Kansas City in 1973. Its impetus was the same concerns that later led to the creation of SLA. The SI program became one of the few postsecondary programs to be designated by the U.S. Department of Education as an Exemplary Education Program in 1981, and the model is currently used at 115 institutions in 12 countries. At IUPUI, we have been using this model since 1991. Unlike PLTL and SLA, SI is voluntary. It is left up to the students whether they choose to seek help from the leader. Students are not obligated to stay for the entire workshop; they can come late or leave when their questions are answered. Personally, I feel it leaves too much responsibility to the student and those who need help may not seek it. However, our leaders promote SI in contacting those students who are doing poorly and encouraging them to attend an SI session.

Similarities and differences with PLTL

Getting to the characteristics unique to each program, I noted many similarities and differences among them, finding these through many meetings with faculty and staff, observations of workshops, and weekly meetings with the mentors. I based these comparisons on three criteria: mentor involvement, student involvement, and activities used in the workshop. Because SLA and SI are very similar, I grouped the two programs together and compared them to PLTL.

I found the largest similarity very comforting. The factor that all three programs have in common is that they are based on active learning. It is documented that learning is more effective when the students are helping each other, working together to solve a problem. This is the idea of peer facilitation; allowing for open dialogue among students, questioning material and discussion. All three programs emphasize the importance of facilitation in workshops, instead of having the mentor serve as another lecturer.

As a side note: there is a minor difference I noticed right away that does not really affect anyone but me, but I thought it was humorous. It is the lingo used by the different programs. PLTL has *leaders* and *super leaders* and *workshops*; SLA and SI have *mentors* and *coordinators* and *sessions*.

In the beginning of the fall semester I attended my first Chemistry Workshop. I immediately noticed a difference between PLTL and SLA. Those taking Chemistry are science-focused with a large share of quantitative problem-solving. Students need this class in order to fill their degree requirements. Some introductory courses in SLA and SI, such as Psychology, are not necessarily taken by those wanting to pursue a degree in these fields. Psychology is a mixture of students who either need this as an introductory requirement or students who just need any introductory course. PLTL students, and those students taking the Biology for a major course in SLA, tend to be more focused on understanding the material because they cannot progress in their degree without a decent knowledge of course content and a suitable grade in the course. This places more emphasis on the Psychology leaders to focus on at-risk students who need the high grade, but do not feel a connection to the material.

Though both PLTL and SLA/SI emphasize collaboration, I feel the mentors of SLA and SI are given more training tools for collaboration. During orientation at IUPUI, they are trained on many forms of collaboration, such as group discussion, clusters, and jigsaw classroom. These are forms of group work and classroom arrangements which are seen in Psychology, allowing for more group discussion of theory and

concepts, and for more active workshops. Psychology is predominately memorization of vocabulary words and the application of those words to real-life situations. That allows for activities such as trivia games which tend to get very competitive and highly active. A group that deals with formulas and computational problem-solving might find this hard to utilize and somewhat unnecessary. PLTL only discusses methods of collaboration if it can be utilized with certain material. This leads to another major difference. The idea of collaboration is understood among all but each program differs in their administration of the material. PLTL has a workbook used in the Chemistry workshops to ensure content consistency from session to session. The leader can decide how they approach solving the problems, but they have no choice in the content that is discussed. It is very structured, and I feel that it is necessary in a subject like Chemistry. Psychology and even Biology offer more discussion on the concepts, not so much solving a numerical problem to come to the right answer. This difference allows for SLA and SI leaders to have more freedom to decide what they want to do in their workshops. The leaders create concept maps and vocabulary worksheets that help the students memorize the concepts.

I noticed that there are some differences among the programs that might be beneficial to make common practice for everyone. This is when my long, general job title pays off. I am here to assist everyone, and I do not have to be partial to one or the other. Therefore if I see something useful that is practiced in one program, I figure ways to incorporate it in others, with permission, of course. I am no expert in Chemistry; I took this course my first semester of college when I thought I wanted to be Pre-Vet. I decided to focus on Psychology, incorporating animals in behavioral research. So my future in Chemistry ended with that decision. I might also add I would have done a lot better if I had had a PLTL workshop and leader when I took the course. My expertise now is in peer leading. I am here to help the other leaders develop tools to help their students succeed. As far as PLTL is concerned, I am trying to provide more tools and knowledge for leaders.

Every week the members of the PLTL program have a meeting led by the super leaders and the course faculty. Fifty percent to 75% of the meeting time for PLTL is essentially spent working on content. It is necessary for our leaders to brush up on hard concepts, but they are also peer leaders and would benefit from more resources to help them be better leaders. They respond weekly in journals to answer questions posed by super leaders based on problems and issues that might arise, also allowing them to reflect on things that have happened in their workshops. I am working with the super leaders to add in more activities that will aid the peer leaders in their development. For example, we are introducing the topic of learning styles. We are even giving the leaders the Myers-Briggs personality test to give them an insight as to how people differ starting with personality, then relating this to how they collaborate with others, even ways they learn. Yes, Psychology and Chemistry are coming together; the peer leaders are responding very well. I am trying to emphasize the need to reflect, having them realize that they might need to evaluate their leading methods.

Courses That May Benefit from PLTL

Which program would be best for a specific class? We currently use PLTL for Chemistry which I find to make sense with the workbook component. SI includes introductory Physics which I feel can be a great candidate for PLTL. Physics is similar in the numerical problem-solving and the complexity of multi-concept problems found in Chemistry. Math would be another course sequence that would benefit from PLTL as well. These subjects do not allow for much discussion, it is a matter of solving an equation and finding the right answer. The other courses we have in SLA and SI are effective with the style of the program being that the content deals with memorization in order to grasp it, also allowing for discussion that is theory- based.

So what about our current General Chemistry course in SI? I recently observed an SI workshop, which I noticed was led by one of the two leaders that also lead PLTL Chemistry workshops. We have leaders who lead a double life. I found his workshops resembled each other. He is used to having a workbook to guide all activities in PLTL workshops. When it comes to SI activity planning, he is very structured and content-focused as well, creating worksheets that do not focus on group work, but individually working out the problem. The difference is that students have more freedom to ask questions regarding content that might not be in his worksheet, possibly something from the test. If he had a set assignment that needed to be completed by the students such as problems in the workbook, then he is not able to be this flexible. The downside to this is that it is easy to get off track and he could spend the entire workshop discussing problems from the test so our SI mentors need to create a sense of structure in their workshops, making up for the absence of the workbook.

And for something completely new…

We are in the process of recruiting a new program into the PLTL model, and this program is very different from the numerical subjects I argued for regarding the PLTL model. The course is Introductory French. Though it is nothing like the courses I have argued for PLTL, I realize there is a component that sets it apart and allows it to be grouped with those that benefit from the workbook component. In every foreign language course I have taken we used a study guide as a learning tool. The study guide is the equivalent of a PLTL workbook. The French mentors started using a form of SLA and SI by creating their own activities but I feel that they are finding it hard to create beneficial exercises. A language is similar to numerical subjects being that there is a right or wrong answer; in this case the translation of English to French is set. It is very specific in the process of learning the language with conjugation and sentence formation, allowing for an open discussion is unnecessary. They can still benefit by collaborative learning, for example they can arrange the students in groups to work on conjugation problems. I feel learning a language is more standardized and as they create their workbook, they will see a benefit to it.

My triple life

I lead somewhat of a triple life; having to change my focus, and even nametag, many times each day to fit the specific program I am working for. I learned to shut off a switch in my head and turn the other one on, depending on the task I am working on or the meeting I am attending. I have not quite mastered this skill, seeing as I can mix up certain projects I am working on, confusing for a split second which project I am completing for whom. I thought I learned time management during my undergraduate years but find that was inconsequential compared to the daily challenges I now face. Being the first to take on this position, I realized that daily tasks are not a part of my vocabulary. It has been up to me to develop this position, which has been a new but enjoyable experience for me.

I was glad to be asked to share my experience of working in a mixture of different mentoring programs. Though it may be overwhelming at times, I gain satisfaction every day with all I have done. Writing this article has allowed me to reflect on everything I have accomplished, something I have not done since I started the position. I have been able to do so much to contribute to the success of each program, and am prepared for what the next semester will bring. In the meantime, I can say I have gained more skill in organizing, and have a nice color-coded calendar to help.

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