

The Peer Leader



PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

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Message from the President

Dear PLTLIS community,

Wow... I'm not sure what's the best way to describe our past three months, and what is yet to happen. One day things seemed "normal", and the next we all moved into remote/online mode, classes, peer-led workshops, social meetings... It feels like every new day has brought a new learning experience for all of us on all sides of the education enterprise. If there is a silver lining in the middle of this pandemic, it is that hopefully it has made us all better at being connected, even when we are not physically together.

To this end, we want to create a set of short videos congratulating all students after a challenging semester. We are looking for peer leaders who would be willing to undertake this video collection. If you are interested, or you have a group of peer leaders from your institution who would be willing to participate, make a short video on their phone and send it to info@pltlis.org.

We are also starting a new way for the community to communicate and collaborate. We are hosting PLTLIS:Forums on our website. Do you have any questions about implementing a new PLTL program,

looking for suggestions on challenging issues, or want to start a joint initiative? Come to our forum and if you don't find a topic of interest... just start a new one!

As we continue learning through these unexplored paths, let's take a moment to say thanks, to stay connected to each other and keep expanding in this wonderful enterprise of helping students, peers and each other to make a better world.

Be well,

Marcelo

Marcelo Sztainberg

Northeastern Illinois University

President, Board of Directors

www.pltlis.org

A Scheduling Program for PLTL Teams

At the University of New Hampshire, a master's student in computer science focused his thesis on creating a scheduling program for the PLTL program in chemistry. Currently, we have about 60 student teams in six courses each semester, which has meant sorting about 600 students into time and day slots that are acceptable to them and their PLTL leaders. Until now, my student PLTL Coordinators did all the scheduling manually using google forms and sorting in Excel by visual inspection. This job takes them a good fraction of a weekend. The new scheduling program gets it done in less than ten minutes.

The Computer Science student is exploring creating a small company or service to make this scheduling program available for a fee to other users. We are trying to gauge how much interest there might be in having access to this program from within the PLTL community. If you are interested, please send an email to me, chris.bauer@unh.edu, explaining what the scope of your task is. This same scheduler might solve other scheduling challenges as well (e.g. lab scheduling, recitations, etc.).

My coordinators find out the time and day at which each leader wants to have their weekly team session. We post that as a Google Form. Students choose "preferred", "possible", or "not possible" for each of the sessions. The resulting google file is an Excel .csv file where each row lists the student, email, and the preference choice for every one of the listed sessions. This is part of the input file for the scheduler. The input file has a template which also includes the names, day and time of each leader. This file is submitted to the scheduling program. The output lists on each row: the leader name, followed by the emails of all of the students scheduled into that leader's team. We can hand that email list to each leader for initiating contact with their teams.

The program allows for selectable constraints. Team size is weighted toward six to eight students and prevents teams with fewer than four or more than ten students. These numbers are selectable. It is possible to specify mixing student genders, but not having a singleton (e.g. not allowing less than two males in a team of females). There is a slight weighting built in for students who sign up earlier in the process. If there are different lecture instructors for the same course, it is possible to specify that all

students in a team be from the same instructor's class. Unassigned students are flagged (e.g. for "other" time requests). The program output file can be edited (e.g. to add late leader or student requests) and input for a second scheduling run.

Why don't we use the registrar? From the beginning, we wanted to keep flexibility high for setting schedules. Start times and durations are not constrained by the normal class schedule, and we often use rooms that are not included in the registrar database (conference rooms and the like). Leaders can choose a time that works in their schedule right up to the first day of classes. Students can express choice among multiple options. This tends to keep most people happy.

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Practices in the Making: Home-based Lab Experiments

I teach chemistry at San Jose City College. Due to the coronavirus, we are all working remotely, which is successful for lecture format in most cases. An exception is laboratory work, which purpose is to give students some "hands-on" personal experience. There are virtual lab offerings, somewhat similar to a video game, but this provides an intellectual rather a physical experience.

A solution is to develop simple experiments which can be done at home with household tools such as a postage or kitchen scale, measuring cups, and a thermometer. Chemicals are limited to the grocery store, but plenty of options exist (table salt, bleach, hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, eggs, soft drinks, etc.). Six prototype experiments have been created with this use in mind and the first one, on Density, is posted on the PLTLIS Forum. The other five developed so far can be obtained by contacting me, Bill@bcarlson.net

Perhaps you have developed some experiments and would be interested in sharing what you have developed. The end result could be a lab manual for remote learning, even after the current virus pandemic is over. I would welcome any comments, suggestions, or collaboration.

Bill Carlson

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Peer Leaders' Experiences Online

Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois



Mohamed Jemmali (NEIU Peer Leader, Computer Science)

I can clearly remember the night before being in class not as a student, but as a Peer Leader, one year ago. In my mind a voice keeps repeating all the time, this is not just a simple opportunity, this is an important job, experience, and it's a responsibility, so do your best, and show up confident in front of everyone. Confidence is definitely the key; confidence is the most important thing to achieve a great relationship between you and every other student, but confidence can be easily lost if you lose control from the beginning. The moment when you come to workshop as a Peer Leader, your mood matters, your smile, your smell, your clothes, you have to look professional, it's the right moment to look more serious; after all, you are not a student at that moment, and you are not a professor, but you represent both.

Confidence is very important when it comes to handling a responsibility, but it is built when you are already well prepared. Before going to each workshop session, I take at least one hour to prepare the material, understand the subject very well, and when I arrive, I show up ready to answer any question, or to explain anything. In workshop, I usually include some rules, which may change when needed, but they should be there. These might be if a student doesn't want to work on a problem, they will be picked to go to the board and show their work. Rules are not meant to embarrass anyone, but to make sure that everyone works hard, and doesn't waste time. Each time I have a workshop session, I move around the students, check everyone's screen, help if someone stops me, but also give them a bit of pressure to progress. After two or three weeks from the beginning of a semester, you will have an idea who really will work and who won't, so you can act accordingly by encouraging those who seem a bit lazier, or not serious. With time, you build a friendship with everyone, this friendship give you more flexibility to ask for someone to help another, or to let anyone know that you are open to help after class, or to help by emails or even a text message.

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Peer leading used to be this way for me, until the recent stay-at-home obligation caused by the Corona virus. This does not mean that I am done being a Peer Leader, but means the beginning of a new experience, the experience of having an online workshop, something that I have never done before and I had to make it work. Online workshops are definitely different than face-to-face. It's much more

important to have a good headset and a camera online than wearing formal clothes, or using body language to help you explain something. Your voice matters much more than how you look, or act. I have noticed that I have to work on my tone after I watched myself in a recorded session, something that hadn't been a big concern before. Online workshop difficulties must be faced: When you are talking without seeing the others, you are not even sure if students are listening to you, or if they are really working on the problem, or they are not even in a front of the computer. Most of the students join the online workshop with their camera and microphone off, and even when they decide to turn on the camera, you will not have a chance to look at them while you explain something, because your main focus is on what you share on the screen, so there is no chance to see their facial expressions. Moreover, it's more complicated when you have some students who don't want to use the microphone, and prefer to chat/text you, so then you have to keep your eye on the chat while you are explaining something, otherwise you may read the question later, so you have to go back to a previous point to answer the question, and redo the explanation again.

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Online workshop sessions for me were a new difficulty to be faced as a Peer Leader. This wasn't a surprise for me, but there are some advantages that are rare in face-to-face workshop sessions. The ability to record the whole session and share online is very beneficial to anyone who missed the session, or didn't understand something, and wants to hear the explanation again. Monitoring students is also possible online: it can be done by asking students to share their screen, or to answer a question via the chat function.

In conclusion, peer leading, whether in a physical location or online, is a very unique experience. We are not professors who can give a grade that students care about, and we are not just random people who try to help others with what they can; we are there to make sure that students gain more confidence in solving problems, and feel they have friends who can guide them to gain more knowledge of the material.

University of Texas at El Paso



Paulina R. Torres (UTEP Peer Leader, Chemistry)

Comfort Zones. We all love them; they are safe and reliable. Routine. It's something we all count on, something that keeps our lives in steady rhythm. They make us feel safe. What happens when these are taken from us? We can either decide that all hope has been lost or we can adapt and rise to the occasion. I like to believe that this PLTL program chose the latter option. The harder option. That the program was and is able to use this time to grow and flourish.

This semester was most definitely not conventional, not even in the slightest. The global pandemic seemed to have appeared out of nowhere like a sudden hurricane leaving us with practically no time to prepare for the storm. Had we seen it coming perhaps in the weeks leading up to the beginning of the semester as we went through training, we might have been able to sail more smoothly into this new normal. This, however, was not the case. Virtual workshops were completely uncharted territory for the peer leading program at UTEP and they were something that each of us would have to learn to navigate, for the most part, on our own. I personally relied heavily on the personal interactions and relationships that developed with my students during in-person workshops this semester. I enjoyed watching them laugh - pitifully most times - at my terrible jokes. I admired watching their interest in the subject grow, as well as their curiosity, but most of all I relished those tiny flickers of moments when their eyes lighted up as they finally grasped a concept they had struggled so hard with.

These special, defining moments were harder to capture through a computer screen, and at times it was disheartening. Even as I prepared each week by surfing through videos on YouTube about that week's topic just to find one that they might find intriguing, and trying to create a sense of camaraderie and healthy competition with Kahoot games, I still could not help but fear that I was letting these students down. I would compare the workshop experience that I received to what they were now receiving and felt that it was my job to compensate for these unforeseen circumstances that had so evidently made it impossible to create anything with even a slight resemblance of an in-person environment. Nonetheless, I continued each week trying to keep my students' spirits up, as well as my own, and although I would always be anxious as I saw the reviews of my workshop arrive in my inbox, I was always pleasantly

surprised at the comments that were so encouraging and reassuring. These reviews were a nice reminder that I was making a positive impact with these students, even if at times I felt that I was not. I think it is imperative that these reviews continue, so that old and new Peer Leaders alike are able to not only receive advice about what improvements might be made to make their workshop even better, but also to receive that boost of confidence that each of us so desperately needs every once in a while.

As this program faces the next semester, the significance of teamwork could not be more important. The very core of the PLTL program is team-based learning, peers working together to solve problems. Why, then, would we reserve this technique strictly for the students? One adjustment I would like to witness for this upcoming semester is a stronger sense of community among everyone in the program. Whether it be during training week, or during preview (prep sessions), I would like problems to be covered in such a way as they would be in a workshop with students. It should be the responsibility not only of the individual person, but of the group as a whole, to ensure that everyone is comfortable with the topics they will have to facilitate understanding for the next group of students. While activities are very useful for in-person workshops, it can be much more difficult, almost seemingly impossible, to conduct them virtually. This being the case, I believe it would be quite beneficial to dedicate more time during training to going through practice problems for each topic, especially for the newer Peer Leaders who might be particularly hesitant to admit their need of assistance or review of concepts. Experienced Peer Leaders can attest to the fact that it can be difficult to traverse a first semester of workshops: how to ensure you are covering the most important points, how to manage your time, how to gauge your quiz difficulty, etc. Therefore, I would like to propose that a few experienced Peer Leaders conduct a mock workshop during training week, and even some new Peer Leaders as it could help relieve some of their nervousness, should they so choose.

Even Peer Leaders who have been in the program for several semesters learn something new each semester that pushes them to improve for the next one. For me, that was the importance of making the rules that I plan on implementing very clear from the very first workshop. I have created a syllabus every semester and read it to my students to guarantee that there is a clear understanding of what is expected of them and what they in turn should expect from me. This current semester, however, required the implementation of new rules in regard to online quizzes and homework submissions. It is extremely difficult for me to say no to a student asking to submit an assignment late, and this happened very often once online workshops began. In order to avoid putting myself in this situation, I would like to include the guidelines for an online workshop in case the need for them should arise in future semesters. In the event that this upcoming semester should be online, I plan on investing some time researching more ways to keep virtual workshops engaging. It is my understanding that these virtual workshops are not so out of the ordinary for other universities with a larger population, and I would like to be able to discuss this with those Peer Leaders who are more accustomed to these circumstances. Seeing that most of us are confined to the perimeters of our homes, I think it would be a great opportunity for our program to have virtual discussions and sessions with Peer Leaders from these universities before the beginning of the fall semester. *[To continue this discussion, please go to the Forum at www.pltlis.org]*

I am forever indebted to everything that this program - the students, the Peer Leaders, and the professors - has taught me and the opportunities for growth that it has provided me. I cannot wait to see what is in store for the future of this Peer-Led Team Learning program and I look forward to helping create it.