

Peer Assisted Study Sessions: guidelines for structural and operational success in multi-disciplinary learning communities

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This paper presents findings relating to Peer Assisted Study Sessions programs (PASS) that have been incorporated since 1993 into core curricula of many first year courses offered at The University of Queensland. Continuing evaluation of the program has enabled identification of important benefits gained by students attending PASS, allowing modifications of strategic initiatives and requirements within the program. These initiatives and requirements aim to promote a supportive and optimal learning environment where students can apply, contest and increase their level of knowledge supported by a two tiered mentoring system: academic to PASS leader to student. This paper will outline strategies that have been incorporated into the PASS program to optimise beneficial outcomes for both staff and students.

Background

First year students at the University of Queensland represent a large proportion (38.3%) of the student cohort. Many of these students face an array of challenges (Krause *et al*, 2005), not the least of which can be the daunting experience of navigating around a vast campus, away from familiar surrounds and the omnipresent support of family and friends. It is not uncommon for students who are drawn from diverse social, academic and cultural background, to feel acutely isolated and confused within the first few days of arriving on campus. This problem can compound with the “little fish in a big pond” experience of large, multi-streamed classes, unfamiliar technology and multi-modular curricula.

While these curricula are designed to give students the advantage of studying a large number of topics in separate modules within the one course structure, they also have the potential to alienate rather than engage students. Any lack of coherence between teaching, learning and assessment in this situation may be exacerbated unless there is alignment between course learning objectives and student learning. In this new and relatively unscaffolded educational environment, students may be unable to interpret confusing messages concerning study requirements, resulting in the adoption of surface learning approaches. Unless students are encouraged to play an active role in their learning processes by cultivating an overarching view of the values and critical appraisal inherent in each discipline, and being able to apply

this knowledge creditably, they are in danger of developing poor learning skills with ensuing sub-optimal performance and outcomes (Dearn, 1996).

Problem

Prior to 1993, although weekly tutorial classes have been commonplace at UQ, they were perceived by students as supplying instruction which was supplementary to the course material, rather than as an opportunity for them to clarify, consolidate or apply new concepts to their current level of knowledge. Consequently, failure rates for many courses remained high, with concomitant unacceptably low levels of recruitment to second level courses. Students expressed dissatisfaction with their learning environment, where focus on assessment practice precluded their intention to understand the course material in relation to their experiential background, and according to their perceived level of knowledge.

To address these social and academic issues, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program was embedded in the developed curriculum in many first level courses as a mainstream service for all students. In order that lecturers were able to have a significant investment in the operation of the program, ownership and responsibility for each program was taken up by the respective academic schools or departments, so that every coordinator was an active member of that department. The continuing advantages of this *modus operandi* are numerous and will be discussed in this session.

Rationale

The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Program was designed specifically to provide first year students with targeted, course and program relevant learning support and mentoring, aligned directly with course learning objectives and progressive summative assessment, in a low-risk environment, where learning is facilitated by student peers. Now in its 16th year of implementation, PASS has extended across four faculties, seven schools, and integrated within twenty-six different first year courses. PASS has touched and improved the lives of many thousands of students since its inception in 1993. Regular program evaluations indicate dramatically improved pass rates, significantly reduced attrition and very satisfied students.

The rationale of PASS as a learning model is that it allows the learning facilitators, or PASS leaders, flexibility to align student learning activities structured as formative assessment with progressive course assessment, by providing the scaffold within which leaders can implement or selectively choose their own student-directed instructional tasks for students. Leaders therefore become an integral and bridging part of the academic team. By addressing student learning deficits and by aligning these activities with course learning objectives, the supported study sessions in PASS also address two of the key issues to promote successful learning outcomes for students: curriculum development should include pedagogies that promote a deep approach to learning (Biggs, 1996), and students should have the opportunity to self- and peer-assess via formative assessment practice (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999).

While assessment requirements define how the curriculum should be developed, formative assessment is the diagnostic tool that provides constructive feedback to teaching staff and students over the course of the semester. By focusing on deriving formative information from the task and not from the student, students can identify areas of inconsistency in their knowledge and amend their learning practices accordingly. Ideally, formative learning tasks, or learning activities, ought to be designed to optimally address the diverse learning styles, 'Peer Assisted Study Sessions: guidelines for structural and operational success in multi- 2 disciplinary learning communities', Miller, V., Oldfield, E., Cook, A., Jordan, G. and Kavanagh, M. Nuts and Bolts.

abilities, motivations, and academic backgrounds of the students. As well, delivery should be flexible and the learning environment one that encourages the student to explore, apply and assess their new learning non-judgmentally. These practices will be discussed.

PASS pedagogy

The basis of PASS pedagogy is founded on organized hour-long, weekly, voluntarily attended study sessions for small groups of first year students, where student learning is facilitated by two, course-competent second or third year undergraduate student leaders who re-attend the first level lectures. PASS leaders play a pivotal role in the success of the program. Through peer- and near-peer interactions in this study environment, students are able to admit ignorance and misconceptions and seek information, advice and remediation, without fear of jeopardising their academic performance (Topping, 1996). In courses where PASS has been introduced, student failure and attrition rates have decreased, and an increased recruitment of students to related second level courses in later years has been noted (Miller, Oldfield & Bulmer, 2004). These results will be discussed.

Student participation

Despite the concomitance of structured tutorials and practical classes with PASS, student participation rates remain high, ranging from approximately 35% to 70% of enrolled students for all classes. PASS is generally regarded by attending students as a rewarding experience, chiefly in terms of its perceived academic benefits but also relating to its socially interactive learning environment where students are personally and actively involved in collaborative group learning exercises. For most students experiencing changing lecturers, rotating practical class demonstrators and different lecture streams, the PASS environment is the one personally based, unchanging, small class learning environment that they experience in their first year of university life. Student surveys and student performance evaluation results in support of these findings will also form part of the discussion.

“Nuts and Bolts” presentation

Key issues outlined above, that will form part of this presentation will include: Large classes; formative assessment and formative feedback; generic and transferable skills acquisition; student recruitment to second level courses; student attrition; learning communities; fostering engagement and motivation; enhanced FYE for students; and benefits to students, undergraduate leaders and academia.

Additional points that contribute to the success of PASS as a learning model:

- Formative assessment tasks are effectively designed for group learning
- Prior knowledge and learning skills of students are addressed
- A reference bank of leader generated activities is compiled and updated
- Reference to all resource material: texts and lecture notes, is encouraged
- Learning activities can cater for diverse learning styles of students
- Challenged assumptions promote double-loop learning
- Support for ESL and international students is highlighted
- Supervision from coordinators is mandatory
- Support and timely guidance from academic staff is valued, for example:

- Providing formatively based questions and answers
 - Providing working models
 - Communicating with facilitators regarding student concerns
 - Appraising learning activities created by PASS leaders
 - Supporting coordinators, leaders and students.

References

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