

Planning sustainable peer learning programs: An application and reflection

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Abstract

A Peer Learning Framework was proposed at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) to foster a coherent approach to peer learning programs and to guide the effective design and planning of new initiatives (Skalicky & Brown, 2009). A planning tool was constructed within a theoretical framework underpinned by a community of practice model (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The framework is examined through its application to a program which offers student-facilitated drop-in learning skills support. The framework's community of practice perspective on peer learning provided insights into the UTAS Student Learning Mentor program. A reflection on the usefulness of the Peer Learning Framework and on the process of application is presented. Questions to facilitate deeper consideration of design for peer learning are proposed for addition to the framework.

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Introduction

Peer learning and mentoring has been established as a powerful learning tool, with the potential to facilitate students' development in a range of academic areas, and to enhance confidence and ownership of learning (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 1992; Topping, 1996). Peer learning programs in the tertiary education sector are designed not only to target specific learning outcomes, but also to enhance students' overall university experiences (Anderson & Boud, 1996). Peer learning has been recognised as a proactive and effective approach to support student learning within a context of broadening participation (van de Meer & Scott, 2008). However, it is important that this engagement with peers is of quality, well-conceived and supported. The purpose of this paper is to present an exploration of a Peer Learning Framework (PLF; Skalicky & Brown, 2009) proposed at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) to structure and guide the development of new peer learning programs.

Institutional background

Peer learning is becoming well established at UTAS primarily through the success of the peer assisted study sessions (PASS) program. The PASS program was first piloted at UTAS in 2007, and has since grown into a program supporting 53 first year units, with 46 student leaders offering approximately 90 sessions per week across seven campuses in Tasmania. The success of the program, particularly for first year students, both in terms of supporting them to achieve higher grades and to improve overall student retention (Skalicky, 2010), has led to an increasing demand from teaching staff to offer PASS in their units.

This is unsurprising in the context of an institution and a sector striving to address issues of first year retention, transition and engagement in a climate of significant growth in numbers and diversity of students (Adam, Hartigan, & Brown, 2010; Kift & Nelson, 2005). However, the underpinning principles of a PASS program (Australasian Centre for PASS, 2010) mean that not all requests for PASS in units, or in response to perceived areas of student need, fitted with the nature of PASS or were possible with the available resources without sacrificing quality. The inception and design of the PLF was set against this context.

Drawing on the underlying elements of PASS as a quality and evidence-based program, the PLF aimed to provide a framework that would guide the development of other peer learning programs at UTAS without compromising quality. It also aimed to provide an institutional view of quality peer learning that could consolidate and connect disparate programs that were operating across the university. Unconnected with PASS, staff in various areas of the university had initiated or proposed a range of co-curricular peer mentoring and other peer support or student-led initiatives to meet perceived needs of different schools and cohorts (e.g., Senior Student-Led Study Sessions in the School of Medicine), with many of the programs targeting the first-year cohort (e.g., ULead-UGrow). Indeed, the peer learning environment at UTAS has fluctuated over the years, covering much of the range of peer tutoring outlined in Topping's (1996) typology. While each individual program had its own merits, as does PASS, each program developed and was administered separately.

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In essence, the PLF was proposed as a means of providing a common structure for emerging peer learning programs at UTAS and a quality assurance assessment tool for existing programs, with a focus on the sustainability of such endeavours. Furthermore, as the name implies, the PLF was intended to focus attention and effort on the learning opportunities provided by peer-led groups of the university. While the PASS program is by no means the only model of a successful peer learning program at UTAS or elsewhere, for the reasons outlined, it was vital to the drive and character of the PLF. The aim of the PLF was to ensure that students' learning outcomes and experiences remained a priority in any of the new and varied ways in which peer learning might be enacted at the institution.

The Peer Learning Framework

The framework conceptualises peer learning programs as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Peer learning contexts are considered to be a subset of communities of practice because they involve the collective and active participation of peers towards a stated goal or goals (Skalicky & Brown, 2009). Within the framework, two levels of community of practice are proposed, one amongst the peers leading the interactions (the peer leaders) and one incorporating all of the peers interacting in the network for the purpose defined by the program (the peer learners). The framework is targeted at describing and guiding the operation of formal, co-curricular peer learning groups or programs. The PLF does not address the nature of informal learning networks or peer groups, nor those emerging or utilised

within the core teaching and learning activities of a unit or course.

The framework is presented in the form of a planning tool, informed by a social constructivist view of peer learning (Schunk, 2008) and guiding the planner through considerations pertinent to the implementation of a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). This planning tool is comprised of questions addressing three elements: 1) Community of practice, 2) Peer learning and 3) Evaluation. The first two elements correspond to the community of peers leaders and the interactions of the leaders within the broader community of peers, respectively. Wenger et al.'s (2002) three elements of a community of practice, the domain, community and practice, are also reflected in the first two levels of the framework. The third element of the PLF, evaluation, acknowledges the critical role that collection and analysis of data, both quantitative and qualitative, and ongoing reflection play in informing improvement in teaching and learning endeavours.

Evidence exists for the positive benefits to both tutees and tutors in peer learning relationships, in areas such as writing skills, higher order thinking and confidence (Topping, 1996). This learning potential is assumed in the framework, which focuses on facilitating peer learning at a formal, program level rather than strategies for managing individual peer learning interactions.

As PASS was used as a case study in developing the framework and the questions for planning, applying the planning tool to the PASS program was not seen an objective measure of the transferability of the tool and framework to other programs. This paper describes

how the PLF has been applied to a new peer learning initiative, the Student Learning Mentor (SLM) Program and is accompanied by a reflection on the process and suggestions for the framework's extension.

Case study: The Student Learning Mentor Program

At UTAS, a recently adopted First Year and Transition Framework (FYTF; Brown & Adam, 2010) provides an institution-wide view of what contributes to successful study at University. Drawing on literature and models from other Australian institutions (e.g., Lizzio, 2006; University of Sydney, 2001), and the UTAS context, it proposes five Elements of Success in first-year: Sense of purpose; Being connected to peers, staff, discipline and community; Knowledge and experience of discipline; Independence; and Academic preparedness and development. The SLM Program aims to provide peer-led support for the development of UTAS students' writing and general study skills, addressing the Academic preparedness, Independence and Connectedness elements of the FYTF. It is part of a suite of initiatives provided by the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) that also includes a pre-semester academic orientation and transition program, generic workshops in study and writing skills, discipline- and assignment-specific workshops and individual student consultations.

A proposal was raised in 2008 to offer a drop-in service (inspired by the Flinders Writing Centre, but using student leaders instead of staff), because of the potential benefits to students on a range of levels, including persistence (Cooper, 2010;

Roscoe & Chi, 2007; Young & Fritzsche, 2002). The SLM Program was trialled in 2009, and now operates with five mentors each on the two major UTAS campuses: Hobart and Launceston, and an additional member (from 2011) dedicated to providing online peer support for distance and remote campus students. The mentors receive training and ongoing support from a coordinator based in CALT. The drop-in service operates out of dedicated spaces on each main campus three or four hours per day, Tuesdays to Thursdays. The drop-in supports students from across the undergraduate community, though the majority of attendees are in their first year of study.

Peer study support programs are not new. The discipline-specific Supplemental Instruction (known in Australia as PASS) began in the 1970s at the University of Missouri at Kansas (Martin, 2008). Peer writing support, in the form of peer writing centres, have a significant history in the campus traditions of North America (Murphy & Law, 1995; see also <http://writingcenters.org/>) and are also emerging in the UK (O'Neill, 2008). Although not yet as commonplace in Australasian higher education institutions, peer support programs also exist locally. For example, the Peer Writing Assistants program at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has been operating since 1997 and other examples include programs at the University of the Sunshine Coast (peer advisers), QUT (Peer Advisers, Academic Learning), the University of Melbourne (Peer Writing Tutors), and the University of Otago (Student Leadership Peer Support Programme). However, although there are a range of peer learning programs operating in Australasia, the peer learning environment does not resemble that in North America,

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particularly in the case of peer writing support.

Evaluation of the SLM Program with the PLF Planning Tool

The purpose of this case study was to examine the insights that could be afforded by the PLF into one particular peer learning program. This was with a view not only to examine the program, but also to apply and critique the PLF itself. In this way, recommendations could be made regarding the transferability of the PLF to other programs.

In order to progress the study, the questions in the planning tool were answered with reference to documentary evidence collected from the SLM Program.

A review of available data was made from the electronic folder for the program on the Centre's shared server and hard copy material stored in the student learning spaces on each campus.

Sources of data used were: the original program proposal, training materials, agenda items for meetings, SLM resources folders, advertising materials, email communications with mentors and staff, and reports to the UTAS Student Transition and Retention Taskforce (START). For each of the questions in the planning tool, evidence was collated and where it was absent, or limited, the question was flagged to indicate an area for development.

The evaluation of the SLM program against the planning tool is presented in Table 1.

Questions to inform practice	SLM case study
1 Communities of practice	
1.1 Defining your domain	
Why has your domain been established?	In response to First Year issues of retention and transition. To provide an avenue to initiate new members into conventions of the academic community. Because of concerns surrounding the perceived lowering levels of academic preparedness of students entering the university. To capitalise on the benefits of collaborative learning.
What is your shared interest or expertise that distinguishes your community?	Members of the community share an interest in supporting and assisting their peers. As "more knowledgeable others", members share knowledge about the conventions, customs, habits and values of the academic community, particularly in relation to the requirements of writing academically. Members share understandings regarding methods of collaboration and support.

What principles have guided the establishment of your domain?	Co-construction of knowledge by working with peers just beyond the level of the student themselves, or peers providing alternative perspectives on learning or writing. All students can develop their writing and study skills. Principles of social learning.
How do these principles fit with the institutional goals?	These principles align with the institution's strategic objectives (EDGE2; UTAS, 2011) and the focus areas of the first-year focussed START committee. In particular, the principles align with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A1 and A2 in Priority A: Fully embed a high-performance culture; and B5 and B10 in Priority B: Create and implement a distinctive UTAS teaching and learning model. – START Focus Areas 3: Transition Support and 7: Student Leadership and Peer Learning.
How is your domain established?	Primarily through recruitment, training and mentor meetings. SLM Code of Conduct and Ethics Agreement.
How is your domain developed?	Community members' own experiences of study and learning, training, collaborations and discussions.
1.2 Defining and establishing your community	
Who is your community?	SLMs, Student Learning Skills staff
Who will lead the community (who is responsible)?	Coordinator of Student Learning, CALT, and Student Learning Skills staff on each campus
What are the qualities of the people who will form your community?	High-achieving undergraduate students with an interest in assisting other students, good interpersonal skills, patience and commitment to working as a team developing skills.
What are your guidelines for selecting or inviting members of the community?	Target high-achieving students in areas of study from which we have many students seeking assistance (Distinction in targeted unit and at least a Credit average) and which complement our skills set within the community. Select on the basis of qualities outlined above.
What are the processes for selecting/inviting your members?	Email invitation to all eligible students within targeted units, written application, short-listing, interview and successful completion of training.

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<p>How are your guidelines and processes inclusive of diversity?</p>	<p>Students are invited to apply for the position on the basis of their grades. Alternative methods of interviewing are available for students experiencing difficulty attending campus for interview. Students can be interviewed by phone if unable to attend campus in person. Inherent requirements of the position have precluded participation by students with physical disabilities such as sight or speech. A role providing online support only is being trialled currently, which would potentially open the positions to a wider range of student physical abilities.</p> <p>The diversity of the community reflects that of the peer participants, in that neither group includes international students due to funding restrictions.</p>
<p>How will personal and professional development be facilitated?</p>	<p>One-day training at start of year and mid-year. Monthly meetings amongst peer leaders across campuses. Reflection and response at end of year.</p> <p>Opportunities to participate in a range of activities in relation to primary peer role, such as advertising (speaking to large groups), etc. Members participate in shaping the delivery and decision-making surrounding the program.</p>
<p>1.3 Supporting practice</p>	
<p>How do the members of your community develop their shared resources: experiences, tools and ways of addressing problems?</p>	<p>Reflection and development occur at training and mentor meetings.</p> <p>Mentors are rostered on to share time with at least one other mentor.</p> <p>Mentors contribute resources to folders on each campus and a shared central electronic repository.</p>
<p>What opportunities for reflection on learning are built into the practice?</p>	<p>Mid-year training.</p> <p>End of year reflection on their experiences.</p>
<p>How will this be coordinated?</p>	<p>Student Learning Skills staff on each campus & the Student Learning Coordinator, CALT.</p>
<p>How will this be resourced?</p>	<p>The program is part of an enabling and supporting program supported by Commonwealth funding and supplemented by institutional strategic funds.</p>

2 Peer Learning	
Who are the stakeholders in the peer learning?	Peer leaders, Peer learners (domestic undergraduate students), Student Learning Skills staff, Faculty teaching staff, Student Advisers.
How will the stakeholders be inducted into the purpose of the peer learning?	Flyers, presentations as part of the Student Learning Support Network, presentations at lectures by peer leaders (SLMs), training.
With whom will the community be interacting?	Primarily with peers/fellow students. Incidental interactions with faculty teaching staff and Student Advisers.
How will the peers with whom they interact be engaged?	Flyers, presentations at lectures by peer leaders (SLMs), emails and other communications by Student Advisers, reminders from teaching staff (lecturers and tutors).
How will the peers with whom they interact be inducted into the purposes of the community of practice?	Information on advertising. Guidelines displayed in drop-in area. Verbal prompts or responses from peer leaders.
How and where will this interaction take place?	Central locations on the Hobart and Launceston campuses: 11am to 2/3pm, Tuesday to Thursday, in or adjacent to the CALT area.
What will be the characteristics of the interactions?	Peer leaders will provide feedback and guidance for students on written work in terms of structures and conventions of academic writing (but not content), assistance with planning, personal strategies for learning and study, and referral to other services as required/appropriate.
How will this interaction be resourced?	As above, a mixture of Commonwealth and institutional funding.
How will the quality of the interactions with peers be evaluated?	AREA for DEVELOPMENT. Currently, rely on self-report and training. There is a need for observation.
How will student leadership be recognised?	AREA for DEVELOPMENT. No direct recognition currently provided. Experience can be used when applying for other positions or opportunities.
3 Evaluation	
How will the community of practice be evaluated in relation to the purposes outlined in the domain section, the resources required and sustainability?	AREA for DEVELOPMENT. Activities are evaluated by peer learners' self-reports (invited at the end of the year) and peer-leaders' self-report. Evaluation is undertaken of the program as a whole. There is a need to collect additional objective data to add to the qualitative and self-report analyses currently available.

Reflection

Using the planning tool to consider the SLM Program raised interesting observations about not only the SLM Program but also the PLF planning tool itself. Each will now be discussed.

Observations and reflections of the SLM Program

The PLF planning tool highlighted areas of improvement for the sustainability of the program. In particular, the evaluation and recognition of peer leaders' performance and evaluation of the program are areas for development. Topping (1996, p. 325) stresses the vital importance of "monitoring and quality control" in any peer learning endeavour. In and of themselves, these were not startling revelations. There was already an awareness of the deficits in these areas of the program. However, the planning tool did help to highlight these issues, in part, because other aspects of the program were perhaps better defined than anticipated. As is probably the case with many programs as they begin, it is easy to feel that you have missed important considerations. In this case, this sensation was not borne out by the evaluation. In turn, this highlighted a significant value of the PLF: that the planning tool prompted careful consideration of the SLM Program. It necessitated the devotion of *time* to the consideration of what was happening in the program, and why. In this regard, it is significant that the first question of the planning tool relates to the "why" of the domain, before the "what" We are so often seeking to respond to areas of need, to react, fill up and rescue in student support and academia in general, that under the time pressures so pervasive in the area,

there is the potential to jump in a-theoretically or, once in, not to allocate sufficient time for reflection (Ede, 1989). If for no other reason, the planning tool was useful for providing a theoretical framework and a process requiring that careful thought and reflection.

Significantly, thinking about the SLM Program from a community of practice perspective initiated new ideas about the program and its future direction. The conceptualisation of both the leaders and the learners as existing within communities of practice was problematic for the SLM program. The concept of a community of practice amongst peer learners makes sense within the context of PASS, from which model the framework was developed, but may not be applicable to all peer learning programs. In the PASS program, students gather in groups repeatedly over the course of a semester. Although attendance is voluntary and students are not required to register for a single class (as they might do for a lecture or tutorial), many students attend regularly, and the majority of students attend the same PASS session each time they attend. There is the potential, therefore, to productively view the PASS attendees and facilitators as a community of practice comprising peer learners and peer leaders. In contrast, the attendance records for the SLM drop-in form a highly skewed distribution, with the majority of students attending the drop-in once or twice a semester, and only a few students coming regularly. Furthermore, meetings between leaders and learners—between the mentors and their peers—are usually one-on-one. Therefore, this community is best conceptualised as a community of

learners¹ rather than a community of practice. Even then, the claim to “community” is contestable.

However, the “apprenticeship” aspect of the community of practice model is evident in the relationships and practices of the peer leaders and peer learners together. In this context, the boundaries of the domain extend well beyond the drop-in relationship. Particularly as viewed from the perspective of the peer learners, mentors represent the central participants in a community of practice encompassing the university or tertiary education experience. They are the “old-timers” (in Wenger’s, 1998, description) who have knowledge in experience of the practices of this community. All potential students are therefore members of this community, with students moving from periphery towards the centre and back again as they move in and out of the relationship with the mentor. This conceptualisation opens consideration of the potential for peer learners themselves to become central to the community of practice as they pass on understanding and build new knowledge in this domain through their own practices and through interactions with their own peers outside drop-in. However, the domain of this community is potentially hidden to many of the members, as is their membership of the community itself. Nonetheless, this way of thinking about the interactions between peer leaders and learners is a helpful one in so far as it prompted consideration of the potential of

continuing transmission and secondary dissemination of understanding and knowledge generated by attendees to drop-in (our primary peer learners) in collaboration with the mentors (peer leaders), to new groups of peers who have not themselves been party to that initial interaction and collaborative learning process.

Observations about the framework planning tool

The process of applying the framework has not only drawn out elements of the investigated program in need of further attention, but also helped to clarify the scope of operation of the planning tool. This process highlighted the framework’s focus on the community of peer leaders, in contrast with other models of peer learning that focus on the processes of peer learning interactions and/or the outcomes for the peers involved, particularly the “targets” of the program: the peer learners. This focus on the community of peer leaders is consistent with the aims of the framework: to foster a consistent, quality approach to peer learning programs and to guide the development of new programs at the university. A focus on the community of peer leaders is therefore appropriate, as these are the elements of the interaction most under the control of the organisers (the “planners”) of the peer learning program. This also highlights the value of the framework as an addition to that wider section of the literature dealing the immediacy of the interactions between peers as they learn together.

The PLF planning tool provides a bridge between the community of practice literature (and to a lesser extent the peer learning literature) and the pragmatic task

¹ Though not a “learning community” as it has come to be defined in the higher education sphere: as a purposeful linking of units across the curriculum to encourage collaborative and social learning (see e.g., Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2003; though see Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003, for a broader definition).

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of setting up an effective community of practice or peer learning situation that is evidence-based. It removes the need for the practitioner to be familiar with the literature. At the same time, the questions are designed to prompt the planner to connect their practice with the theory by thinking more deeply about these issues than they might otherwise do.

Viewing peer leaders as part of a community of learners removes the expectation that the administrator of such a group be the sole repository of knowledge and guidance. A community of practice conceptualisation can therefore increase sustainability by taking some of the pressure off the organiser to micro-manage everything. The participants of the community themselves, through practice, move from periphery to centre and share the “burden” of responsibility for their interactions. This is not to say that good planning or administration is unnecessary or against the ethos of a peer learning program – it merely represents the character of central participants in the community.

The limitations of the current PLF relate mainly to the second level of community of practice: that of the broader community of peer learners. It would be helpful to have questions that more specifically address whether or not the interactions within this community of learners follow principles designed to foster effective peer learning. There is the potential for the planned peer learning activity defined as the domain in section 1.1 to be self-sustaining but not an effective peer learning environment, before evaluation and monitoring occur. Specifically, an expansion of the question “What will be the characteristics of the interaction?” is suggested to address known principles of peer learning.

There are a myriad of considerations for someone wishing to implement a peer learning scheme. Some of the key considerations when thinking of peer learning in a formal, co-curricular program are ways of ensuring that the leaders are fostering a positive, active and collaborative environment in which the learner maintains ownership of their learning. The five sub-processes of Topping and Ehly’s (2001) model of the peer assisted learning process: organisation and engagement, cognitive conflict, scaffolding and error management, communication, and affect, provide a theoretical grounding for these questions. Four additional questions are suggested for the PLF, drawing on Topping’s sub-processes and providing a starting consideration for the community of peer leaders seeking to foster peer learning:

- “How will leaders ascertain individual learners’ needs?”
- “What activities or methods will be used to achieve your learning outcomes?”
- “What forms of communication (explaining, questioning, prompting, etc.) will you use to emphasise knowledge-building over knowledge-telling?”
- “What methods will be used to promote a positive and emotionally safe environment for the learner(s)?”

The third question, regarding communication, also highlights factors considered to be important for the learning of the peer leaders (Roscoe & Chi, 2007). Although this peer learning framework is focussed on formal, co-curricular programs, potential programs may still vary considerably along the 13 organisational dimensions outlined by Topping (Topping, 2005; Topping & Ehly,

2001). These additional questions are intended to draw the attention of planners to some of the key considerations in peer learning that may not have been addressed by other sections of the framework.

Conclusion

The community of practice model for peer learning programs is a positive conceptualisation that promotes a participatory, and therefore more likely to be sustainable, organisation and leadership. The process of applying the PLF planning tool to the SLM Program proved a valuable exercise. It provided a timely reminder of those aspects of the program that require attention, namely the evaluation and recognition of peer leader performance. It also stimulated consideration of the clients in the program, the majority of whom are in first year, as active participants in a wider community of learners at the university, which potentially generates new directions for the service. It is suggested that the efficacy of the framework as a planning tool could be enhanced by the addition of questions designed to guide planners of new programs in the creation of effective peer learning environments. The PLF should prove a valuable tool for establishing a consistent, quality peer learning approach at UTAS and potentially other institutions undertaking advancement in this area.

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