

Winter 2022

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Recommended Citation

Pham, Min, Enabling the Enablers: Professional Development for Peer Leaders to Enhance the Learning Experience of Enabling Education Students, *Journal of Peer Learning*, 15, 2022, 4-16. Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ajpl/vol15/iss1/2>

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Journal of Peer Learning (2022) Vol 15: 4-16

Enabling the Enablers: Professional Development for Peer Leaders to Enhance the Learning Experience of Enabling Education Students

Min Pham

Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of a series of professional development workshops for peer leaders to enhance the student learning experience at an Australian enabling education institution over the period of three years (2019–2021). It reports the impact of these workshops on peer leaders' professional development and, more importantly, on enhancing the learning experience of students participating in Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). The paper also highlights the effect of this initiative on curricular and teaching practices. The insights for this report are drawn from a wide range of data including student and peer leader surveys, reflections, and teacher commentaries. Via the use of NVivo, qualitative data was coded and organised into themes while quantitative data was used as a reference for the discussion of the identified themes. The findings directly support the recommendation that sufficient and contextualised professional development training be provided to promote peer leaders' impacts on student learning experience and to provide an important source of reference for curricular and teaching practices.

Introduction

Mainly based on Supplemental Instruction developed in 1973 by Martin Deanna at the University of Missouri, Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is an academic assistance program in which high-achieving senior students are employed as PASS leaders to facilitate peer-to-peer learning sessions. This type of peer learning program has been implemented in dozens of higher education institutions across Australia and a great number of education institutions in the world (Keup, 2012). PASS was initially designed to target students in "high-risk courses" (Martin & Arendale, 1992) but has been expanded to go beyond being a remedial program to promote peer learning for all students. This paper reports on the professional development provided to assist peer leaders to conduct PASS in ways that are responsive to the particular needs of students in higher education enabling programs. It first reviews relevant studies to note a lack of contextualised professional development training for peer leaders to meet specific needs of their peers. The paper will then provide the contextual context in which the study was conducted and the data collection process. It will finally present the key findings, discussion, and recommendation for both practice and research regarding professional development training for peer leaders to enhance the learning experience and outcomes of students in higher education.

Literature Review

Dawson et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of literature regarding the effectiveness of peer leader programs between 2001 and 2010 and identified a wide range of benefits to the student learning experience. Tai et al. (2016) reviewed 43 studies on peer learning within the medical education area and found similar benefits—not only to academic achievement, such as higher mean grades, lower failure and withdrawal rates, and higher retention and graduation rates, but also to personal development such as social relationship, general satisfaction, and wellbeing. In another literature review, Shook and Keup (2012) identified and discussed the many benefits of peer leader programs from the perspectives of attendees, peer leaders, and institutions, including a “stronger sense of community, greater social and academic integration, and a rich network of resource and referral agents dedicated to their success” (Shook & Keup, 2012, p. 7). Peer leaders benefit through their involvement and investment of time and expertise—“physical and psychological energy” (Astin, 1999)—leading to gains ranging from academic achievement to intercultural communication and leadership skills, effective time management, critical thinking, career readiness, and employability (Hirsch, 2021; Hoiland et al., 2020; Keup, 2012; Koren, 2022; Malm et al., 2022; Riser, 2021). Peer leader programs also benefit institutions in several ways. They are cost effective, and they can function as an effective channel for institutions to disseminate information to wider communities (Shook & Keup, 2014). In addition, leaders in these programs are more likely to involve themselves as alumni upon their graduation and can make service and financial contribution back to their institutions (Newton & Ender, 2010). The effectiveness of PASS continues to be reported in empirical studies from various educational settings around the world (Chilvers, 2016; Keup, 2012), in different modes of delivery such as online and face-to-face (Beaumont et al., 2012; Lim et al., 2016), and across academic disciplines (Alsulmi Mansour et al., 2022; Anfuso, 2022; Larkin & Hitch, 2019; Muller et al., 2018; Tai et al., 2016). Overall, the effectiveness of peer leader programs has been largely validated by empirical research for more than four decades.

One key reason for the effectiveness of peer leaders is that “they have the potential to be role models and encourage academic and social responsibility” (Shook & Keup, 2012, p. 14). PASS leader professional development is the responsibility of PASS supervisors, who are often teachers who additionally take on the role of implementing and managing PASS programs at their own institutions. To support this role, the supervisors themselves are often offered professional development, such as that from the Australian National Centre for PASS at the University of Wollongong (Skalicky, 2008). This training program “covers all aspects relating to implementing, ongoing management, and evaluation of a PASS program” and identifies the ultimate goal of PASS as to learn “subjects/content which many students may find challenging” (National Centre for PASS, 2013). As a result, it could be assumed that the professional training offered by supervisors to peer leaders is primarily on peer collaboration to study academic subject content. However, such a focus does not take into account the diversity of student learning needs and educational settings such as enabling education, where a variety of factors impact student success in content learning. This paper therefore argues that good practice for PASS leaders requires contextualised professional development that considers the diversity of student learning needs and the environment in which they work at any given time. This paper provides a case

study of such contextualised professional development in an Australian enabling education institution.

The Institutional Context

The case institution is the University of South Australia's College (UniSA College), which offers pre-degree enabling programs defined as non-award programs incorporating subjects or modules designed to develop students' academic skills for their transition into higher-level award programs (National Association of Enabling Educators in Australia, 2019). UniSA College currently offers three enabling programs—Foundation Studies Program, Diploma Program, and Aboriginal Pathway Program—to students in two urban campuses and four regional and remote centres in South Australia. Classes are offered externally, face-to-face, and online via Zoom since the COVID-19 pandemic. Students are required to complete a certain number of courses and achieve certain grade averages in order to apply for their preferred undergraduate programs.

Enabling education in higher education (HE) differs from traditional HE mainly in the diversity of student cohorts. Students in tertiary enabling education often represent one or more equity group categories: low social economic status (SES), non-English speaking background (NESB), or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI) (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2017). Students enrolling in enabling education programs have often exited school early or with limited success in their final years of schooling, implying that they have non-academic levels of literacy and numeracy. Within UniSA College, students are enormously diverse in terms of their socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (see Table 1). For instance, some students have just completed high school while others may have not completed a formal education program. Still other students return to study after many years of working in industry.

Table 1

Proportion of students in equity groups in 2020 (UniSA BIP 2021)

Categories	UniSA College	All UniSA	UniSA College (%)	All UniSA (%)
Student numbers	1,514	37,847	100	100
Low SES	692	7,788	45.71	20.58
NESB	168	1,301	11.10	3.44
Disability	252	4,470	16.64	11.81
ATSI	104	550	6.87	1.45

The extent of diversity means that students come to class with very different expectations, knowledge, skills, experiences, and assumptions. This variation makes it more challenging to scaffold students' learning in an enabling program when compared to traditional cohorts of university students, and it contributes to a common view of diversity as deficit (Hattam & Prosser, 2018). Among many corollaries of such a deficit view is students' negative learning experience. Also, non-academic factors such as sense of belonging, self-confidence, and peer relationships often play a more important role in learning experience and academic performance of enabling education students compared to their peers in traditional HE programs (Bennett et al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2018). The unique characteristics of enabling education require different pedagogical approaches scaffolding student academic and non-

academic needs. UniSA College believes that this contextually specific challenge can largely be addressed through relevant peer assistance if sufficient and contextualised professional development is provided to peer leaders, which is the focus of this study.

Professional Development for PASS Leaders

PASS was established at UniSA College in 2018 to provide extra support to its students, drawing on PASS programs in other academic units of the university. PASS programs in other academic units are designed to support traditional HE students who, as discussed above, are different from their peers in enabling education programs. For these reasons, a series of contextualised professional development workshops was developed over time and progressively offered to college PASS leaders. This series was designed in response to emerging data collected from surveys of PASS attendees and leaders. It consists of four independent three-hour workshops: Induction to Enabling Pedagogies, Supporting English as Additional Language/Dialect (EALD) Students, Utilising Zoom for PASS Sessions, and Unpacking Language Needs to Support Content Learning. These workshops have been provided annually to a total of 30 PASS leaders over a period of three years: 2019–2021.

The Induction to Enabling Pedagogies workshop provides peer leaders with a full understanding of the college student diversity and its enabling pedagogies that inform the core of the teaching approaches and curriculum design at the college. The workshop unpacks the nature of the enabling pedagogies with a clear focus on ethos of care, sense of belonging, and transformative scaffolding learning. The workshop starts with PASS leaders sharing and reflecting on their own experience as enabling education students in order to understand how non-academic factors can influence their efforts to achieve academic outcomes. This exercise highlights the importance of social connection between PASS leaders and attendees in enabling education. The workshop provides PASS leaders with skills to build mutual trust with peers (Motta & Bennett 2017).

Supporting EALD Students is a workshop developed in 2019 when the initial data showed that around 80% of PASS attendees identified as having English as an additional language or dialect (EALD). The workshop was designed on the basis of a research review in the language education area to identify the challenges that EALD students often encounter in their studies. It equipped peer leaders with understanding of how EALD students have to learn English, learn about English, and learn academic content through English. Consequently, this led to the development of research-informed strategies for the leaders to support EALD peers.

The Utilising Zoom for PASS Sessions workshop was developed and first delivered in March 2020 as a rapid response to the university's transition online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The workshop provides PASS leaders with the technical and pedagogical skills to maximise the affordances of Zoom to run their sessions online. PASS leaders were also trained to use other digital platforms such as Padlet and Mentimeter within Zoom sessions to increase its affordances and make it more interactive. The workshop not only enabled PASS leaders to continue providing support for students during the COVID-19

pandemic but also extended the reach of PASS to students in regional areas of South Australia such as Port Lincoln and Mount Gambier.

The final workshop in the series—Unpacking Language Needs to Support Content Learning—arose from an emerging situation in early 2021. PASS leaders reported that they found it challenging to support students with academic content due to the students' limited English proficiency in some specific learning areas such as math and health science. In response, this workshop was designed using a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) model (Scobar, 2019) integrated with a teaching and learning cycle (Derewiaka & Jones, 2016) to unpack the language demands of each step in content learning. An example from the workshop is that PASS leaders collaboratively analyse an academic item to identify both the language and content needs for students to comprehend it. Leaders will then practise developing activities to integrate both language and content support for their peers. Additionally, translanguaging pedagogies were introduced to PASS leaders to support EALD students in learning STEM subjects (Mazak & Carroll, 2017) as several PASS leaders were multilingual.

Data Collection

Over the last three years, PASS has offered 220 two-hour sessions both online and face-to-face and has welcomed 650 student attendees. This is a significant number in the context of the college's one-year pathway programs (around 700 EFTSL, equivalent to fulltime student load, yearly intake). Surveys of PASS attendees and leaders were conducted, and comments from teachers were also sought to assess the quality and impacts of the series of professional development workshops.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from PASS leaders. Qualitative data were collected from voluntary anonymous surveys to PASS leaders, attendees, and teachers. Survey questions for PASS leaders primarily focused on the quality of the series of professional development workshops and their own reflections on being a peer leader. All 30 PASS leaders responded to the survey with eight of them (Leaders 1-8) providing additional reflections in the survey. Survey questions for PASS attendees mainly focused on the quality of service offered by the PASS leaders (e.g., to what degree they were satisfied with the PASS service; whether they would recommend other students attend PASS sessions; and what they liked best and what would improve the service). Ultimately, 91 students completed the attendee survey with multiple-choice responses and 29 respondents provided additional optional comments. It is worth noting here that 100% of attendee respondents provided that there was no need for any change in PASS while also suggesting having more sessions to suit their study timetable. A survey was also sought anonymously from the college teachers about the impacts of the PASS program on students in their courses and on their own teaching practices. Seven teachers (Teachers 1-7) including permanent, sessional, main campus, and regional teachers provided comments related to the PASS program.

Table 2
Summary of data collection sources

Sources	Number	Reflections	Comments	Coded
Attendee survey	91	N/A	29	N/A
Leader survey	30	08	N/A	Leader 1–8
Teacher survey	07	N/A	07	Teacher 1–7
Course grade	01	N/A	N/A	N/A

Quantitative data were also collected anonymously from the attendee and leader surveys and on student academic performance in one of the core courses at the college. Qualitative data were collected in written form and coded through the use of NVivo for common or recurring themes, defined as internally consistent units comprising semantically bounded components (Guest et al., 2012). Quantitative data served as an additional source of reference to understand the quality and impacts of the professional development workshops for PASS leaders. Findings from these data are summarised and discussed below from the leader, attendee, and teacher perspectives.

Findings and Discussion

So many non-academic things involved

From the leader perspective, the series of professional development workshops has helped them understand their peers better and thus appreciate themselves being students in enabling education. The leaders (30 out of 30) found all the workshops “very useful” in enabling them to understand the diversity of students and possible challenges for them when studying in enabling programs. One PASS leader reflected:

Being a high achiever myself, I thought that just keep working hard can help to achieve good grades, but I did not know that for some students, it was not that simple, so many non-academic things involved (Leader 2).

Another leader recalled the learning experience at the college and commented:

I enjoyed all the support from my tutors and was accepted to my desired undergraduate program, but I did not realise until now that to support me and my peers, my teachers had done a lot more than just teaching (Leader 5).

Four leaders reflected that attending and gaining support from the PASS service when they were themselves enabling education students made them want to become a leader (Leaders 2, 3, 5, and 6). These reflections support the notion that enabling education students attending PASS sessions may not need just academic support but something more personal than that.

Understanding how complex learning is for some peers and how much it takes for teaching to be effective, these PASS leaders expressed their appreciation for their own educational experience and the support they received from their teachers. These intangible benefits have not been widely reported in the literature, which has mainly covered academic knowledge and skills (Koren, 2022; Malm, 2022).

PASS leaders also highlighted how the professional development workshops enabled them to develop their social skills, such as building trust and social connection (Bear & Jones, 2017; Gurjee, 2020), which were specifically relevant to supporting enabling education peers. Leader 7 shared an e-mail from a student who visited PASS:

I passed chemistry with distinction and it's all thanks to you. The exam was on 29th and I swotted over what you helped me. When I sat down ready to start, I felt I must not let you down, concentrate!

A similar trust and social connection, which can result in a good long-term peer-to-peer relationship, was also shared by Leader 2:

I ran into a student while I was out shopping, and we stopped and had a chat. She was quite happy with herself, not like when she came to us at first, and she was thrilled with the results she received. She looked confident and thanked PASS.

Trust and social connection between PASS leaders and their peers appear to be a prerequisite for success in peer learning, at least in enabling education. Such connection was established and reinforced by PASS leaders thanks to the skills and knowledge provided to them in the professional development workshops. While social connection is important in peer-led programs, as discussed above, professional development training for peer leaders has focused on group discussion facilitation and academic content support (Skalicky, 2008).

Another important theme from the leader perspective is the benefit of being able to develop their pedagogical skills through the series of workshops. While PASS leaders in mainstream or traditional higher education programs may not encounter a language barrier as a challenge in supporting their peers, this is not the case for peer leaders in enabling education. One leader noted that:

Most of the students we worked with were either EALD or students who were not academic by nature. They had trouble with the bones of the English language rather than the content (Leader 1).

Leaders explained how the workshops helped them to address this challenge:

The training session on EALD students provided us with tools that allow us to better understand ways of communicating when English is not a first language or even trying to communicate an idea with a fluent English-speaking student. Such tools are not limited in capacity with non-English speaking students but, applied correctly, can help all students (Leader 8).

Another leader liked the step-by-step strategies discussed in the workshop as they “could make more sense to understand and explain for college students and help to improve their learning skills” (Leader 3). Leader 2 found an immediately useful function for the information in the final workshop:

I liked the combination of Content and Language Integrated Learning and Teaching and Learning Cycle as it assists me to better help students

with their learning, especially those who may say “I don’t know what to do.”

Peer leaders’ skills were also recognised and appreciated by students, as evidenced in the attendee survey comments:

I felt like they know my language struggle and they know how to explain things in ways I can understand. The most I like from PASS is their English that I can understand and can learn more about my subject. It helps me express my ideas in writing better. Everything was explained simple and well. I like the way that the peer student helped me to understand difficult concepts in my bioscience and human physiology and explained them in both English and Pashto [the student’s first language].

These comments indicate the impact of the skills that PASS leaders developed through the series of professional development workshops.

PASS leaders also shared how the professional development training assisted them in supporting their peers in their own current undergraduate programs. Leader 1, a college graduate, shared that:

Thanks to all the workshops, my leadership skills have grown substantially, which has in turn had a positive impact on my confidence and ability to lead many group assignments to achieve high standards. Once some students have seen how effective my strategies are, a few of my peers in my undergraduate program have even come to me asking for guidance on things that we regularly help students in our PASS sessions at the college.

In this way, there has been an impact of the college’s professional development training for traditional HE students in the university, expanding the impacts of the training.

Talking to someone about my studies feels like therapy!

From the PASS attendee perspective, the impacts of the series of professional development workshops can be clearly illustrated. All 100% (91 of 91) of survey respondents were “very satisfied” with the PASS service and “strongly” recommended that other students visit PASS. More particularly, these impacts—through the delivery of the leaders—promoted students’ sense of belonging, confidence, and motivation to aim high in their studies. Sense of belonging, the feeling of being accepted and valued by peers and institutions, is important to student engagement and wellbeing, especially in enabling education (Crawford et al., 2018). For UniSA College students, this sense of belonging was reinforced by the ethos of care that the college provides them additionally through the PASS service. A regional student appreciated knowing that she could see and talk to a peer leader in Adelaide at 8:00 p.m. to ask for help, especially during the difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This appreciation was also echoed by another attendee: “The offer of PASS Zoom sessions makes me feel like the college truly cares about my education. PASS leaders are very good at Zoom and make it interesting to learn.” This ethos of care in turn motivates students to study hard.

The support from PASS leaders also contributes to promoting student confidence, a feeling of being capable of studying at the tertiary level (Mantovani et al., 2020). One attendee elaborated:

The support that I received from peer leaders meant that I had the confidence to complete my work.... There has been non-judgement! ... I feel relieved; sharing or talking to someone about my studies feels like therapy.

Reflecting on her own experience as a PASS attendee one year ago, Leader 4 recalled:

I was constantly anxious and cried more than once. I went to see a PASS leader; she built my confidence, soothed my unnecessary anxiety, instilled a sense of pride in my work, and gave me the strength to finish the year without further breakdowns. This motivated me to become a PASS leader myself.

This reflection illustrates how meaningfully leaders can promote peer confidence and resilience to continue pursuing their studies, which might not have been possible without PASS professional development support. Confidence instilled by the peer leaders has motivated students to aim high. One attendee commented that the guidance and encouragement from peer leaders give them “confidence to continue and polish the work with a higher aim.” Another student recalled:

Talking to PASS leaders made me realise that it is normal to reach out for support, and English is not my first language, so it is okay that I made mistakes. I can learn it, and I want to achieve higher for my grade.

These non-academic factors, such as feelings of being cared for and valued, self-confidence, and motivation to aim high, have turned into academic outcomes. The positive correlation between students' attendance at PASS and their course grade, shown in Figure 1, can illustrate how peer leaders motivated their peers to aim high and achieve their goals.

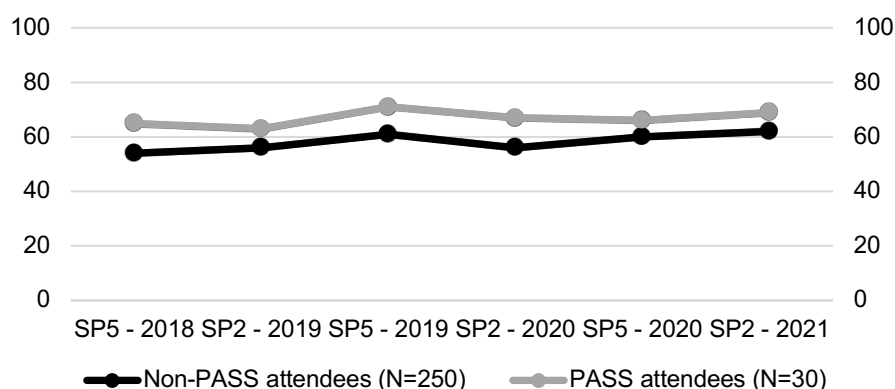


Figure 1. Overall course grade average in comparison (UniSA SAS 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates the average grades of both PASS attendees and their peers in one of the core courses at the college. The figure shows that PASS attendees achieved around 8% higher in their course grades compared to those of non-attendee peers. While better academic achievement has often been reported as the main outcome of PASS (Dawson et al., 2014; Shook & Keup, 2012), this study showed that the support from peer leaders with regard to non-academic factors was also important to the achievement of academic outcomes; they did not just support academic content learning. This outcome has been made possible in enabling education thanks to skills that PASS leaders have employed to support students.

Important closing of the loop to support student success

From the teacher perspective, the series of professional development workshops served as an important source of reference that added value to teachers' curricular and pedagogical practices. This perspective illustrates that the series of the professional development workshops also affected student learning outcomes through college academics. One teacher commented:

My conversation with a PASS leader about the workshop on EALD students helped me come up with a way that I have supported a couple of non-native English students in conjunction with an English language tutor to do our best to support them (Teacher 2).

The skills developed from the workshops enabled PASS leaders to make suggestions to teachers regarding their courses to make them more accessible to students. This was appreciated, for example, by Teacher 1, who indicated:

The suggestion from PASS team has helped me to identify challenges for students in my courses, which I can help to address, providing that important closing of the loop to support student success (Teacher 1).

The impacts of the professional development workshops were clearly recognised by Teacher 5, who was also one of the program directors.

Whilst building content knowledge is an important outcome of PASS, it is often the ability to share strategies to overcome challenges and build resilience which prove to be even more valuable. In my experience as program director, college PASS leaders have knowledge and skills for all of these that they have developed through a number of professional development workshops (Teacher 5).

Non-academic factors are important, even more so in enabling education. Therefore, any support for students in enabling education needs to take this importance into consideration. To support their peers, PASS leaders need to be provided with sufficient and contextually relevant knowledge and skills. At UniSA College, such knowledge and skills have been developed through the professional development training that leaders engaged in over the last three years.

Conclusion

The success of PASS at the UniSA College lies with the development and delivery of a series of professional development workshops over a period of

three years. One important reason for this success is that the workshops took into consideration the nature of enabling education and its unique characteristics. The findings from this paper highlight the importance of non-academic support provided by peer leaders for students in achieving academic outcomes—the ultimate goal of peer learning programs. These findings also indicate that more than just academic expertise is needed to bring about positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. Therefore, teachers' understanding of what students experience in life and what they bring with them to class should be as important as their academic expertise in supporting their students, at least for those in the enabling education space. It is recommended that contextually specific and emerging needs of the student cohort be considered while creating professional development training for peer leaders. Such training should be aligned with and should responsively and progressively address contextually specific needs of the specific student cohort. It is further suggested that peer leaders be given opportunities to communicate frequently with academics to close the loop in supporting students. This is essential as there have been cases when PASS was managed solely by a staff member who was not a teaching academic and who was in isolation from the pedagogical practices of an education setting. Further research could be helpful to explore the relevance and benefits of specific and contextualised professional development training for peer leaders in other education contexts (e.g., special education) for the promotion of student learning experiences and outcomes.

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