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Editorial: Evaluation as the “Eternal” Challenge: Opportunities and Innovations in Demonstrating Value in Ever-Changing Peer Learning Environments

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Editorial: Evaluation as the “Eternal” Challenge: Opportunities and Innovations in Demonstrating Value in Ever-Changing Peer Learning Environments

Clare Power, Henk Huijser, and Charith Rathnayaka

We are pleased to welcome you to Volume 14 of the *Journal of Peer Learning*, which offers a rich range of informative and stimulating articles spanning a number of disciplines and countries. The ongoing need to evaluate the impact of peer learning programs provides the opportunity to incorporate new perspectives and focuses, yet it also presents ongoing challenges. However, the multiple lenses that inform evaluative research contribute to the rich literature on peer learning, as shown in the articles in this volume of the journal where, although thematically different, evaluation is a consistent thread throughout. Two of the articles consider the identity of peer mentors but from different orientations: one interrogates and proposes a model for understanding the multiple variables that contribute to the formation of a peer mentor’s identity. The second evaluates the stability of the multi-pronged peer mentor identity in an unanticipated move to the online learning environment. The third article considers the development of an evaluation tool as a critical factor in peer learning innovations, as applied to clinical placements in the Allied Health sector. This article reinforces the adaptive capacity of peer learning as a way of enhancing the student experience and addressing context-specific challenges. The importance of fit-for-purpose evaluation is seen in the approach taken in the fourth article regarding the effectiveness of peer learning in a foundation course. Peer learning programs can be likened to a river, where the flow of the river is ever-changing, but the identity of each particular river is bound by its internal and external landscapes. While those landscapes can be studied and evaluated, the water in the river moves differently all the time, so longitudinal research must be based on continually changing elements, which is precisely what makes it such a challenging endeavour and a recurring theme in the *Journal of Peer Learning*. Again, the complexity of variables in peer learning programs gives rise to contemplative analysis of approaches to evaluation; the fifth paper identifies some of the perceived challenges and potential ways to address them in this space.

The field of peer learning is strengthened by conceptually informed analyses of practices. In their article, Arendale, Hane, and Fredrickson propose a replicable model for understanding the “how and why” of identity formation among peer group study leaders. As the authors explain, identity is related to self-perception rather than skill acquisition, and leadership identity can be intentionally fostered rather than being a by-product for peer leaders. They present a very comprehensive literature review informed by triangulated data collection in the form of online surveys, observation and analysis of leaders’ reflection, and interviews. The findings lead to an extension of Arendale’s earlier research into a leader identity development model for peer study group

facilitators. The model acknowledges the complexity of variables contributing to leadership identity development and, as such, is presented as an ecosystem of interrelated factors. The authors further propose recommendations for study group programs to enhance opportunities for development of leader identity: integrating leadership vocabulary, creating leadership opportunities, incorporating the intentional use of reflections, and assessing leadership development. Their article may inform and perhaps inspire peer learning programs in leadership training and research orientations.

The theme of mentor identity similarly underpins the article by Phelan et al., which is set in the context of embedded peer mentors in timetabled science workshops. However, their article's focus is not on the formation of the mentors' identity but rather on the nature of their identities. Within this embedded program, peer mentors attend the classes with students and interact with students within the workshop space. The associated research, which was co-created with the four participant mentors, drew on a mixed methods approach that included analysing mentors' journals, survey data, and reflective discussions. Based on their analysis of the research, the authors developed a three-part schema related to the identities of peer mentors when embedded in class, which they identified as identity, associated roles, and associated practices. Similar to Arendale et al., the authors note the interdependent nature of these elements. As the program was impacted by COVID-19, the workshops had to move online early into the semester. Yet, mentors' identities were not impacted, and they sustained a supportive role for students.

As demonstrated through the diverse body of work published by the *Journal of Peer Learning* for almost 15 years now, peer learning is a versatile tool that has applicability and credibility across many fields, and it has been proven to have dual value in enhancing the overall learning and teaching process as well as aiding the overall fields in overcoming specific difficulties. In their research paper, Aldrich, Anderson, Green, and Hancock discuss how a peer learning model can be utilised to address a sector-wide shortfall of clinical placements for Allied Health professionals. This Hull Evaluation-Appraisal-Student-Integrated (EASI) model combines a variety of methods in an attempt to address barriers, perceived by students as well as educators, to adopting a peer learning placement model in Allied Health. The Hull EASI model proposes a team-based approach to distributing the responsibility of learning in one-to-few peer-assisted learning groups instead of solely relying on the clinical educators' responsibility. This approach can be seen as a progressive and sustainable solution at a time when health systems around the world are struggling to cope with unprecedented demand due to a range of challenges on multiple fronts, one of them being a "once-in-a-century" pandemic. With continuing development and evaluation of impact, it would be interesting to see whether this model has further value for learners, the wider field of health education, and beyond.

In many ways, peer learning programs are about widening participation and creating access to higher education. The paper by Bermingham, Boylan, and Ryan is therefore highly relevant in that it directly discusses an Access Foundation Program, in this case in an Irish context, with a specific focus on computer programming, which is traditionally perceived as a difficult subject. The study focuses on a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program for mature-age

students, and it describes the first of a three-stage action research study that examines the perceived effects of this program on learning and on whether it provided a positive learning support structure for those enrolled in it. Evaluating peer-assisted learning programs in terms of impact has long been considered a challenge, as it is often difficult to draw direct causal links between peer learning programs and learning outcomes, which is partly because participation in these programs is self-selected, so those who self-select are likely to be motivated to study, as opposed to others who may also benefit from a peer learning program. This has been a recurring theme in the *Journal of Peer Learning* for a long time, and evaluation of impact is clearly still an important theme today. This article shows again that there are different ways of measuring impact, and learners' perceptions of value are an important measure, even if we cannot draw a direct causal link to learning outcomes. Still, the authors demonstrate a positive effect on comprehension for the participants in this program, but more importantly, the program created an overall improved learning experience and supportive environment for the mature-aged students who took part in it.

It is easy to forget that peer learning programs in their various forms have been part of the higher education context for a long time, and Prideaux, Jones, and Paul not only draw attention to this but also explore what the implications might be when peer learning becomes "business as usual" rather than seen as an innovative approach to improving learning experiences. Their specific case study focuses on a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program at the University of Leeds that has been running as part of the philosophy program for more than 25 years, making it one of the longest running of its kind in the UK. This context also makes it a perfect case study to reflect on the program's impact. The study draws on accounts from teachers, students, and graduates to explore the program's role in fostering an academic community. In the process, the authors draw attention to the challenge of peer leaders being seen as "teaching on the cheap." Unfortunately, this is not the only challenge, as a reduction in program embeddedness and frequency of peer learning sessions have undermined the ability to meet the objective of developing an academic community. Finally, they make an important observation that is probably transferable to peer programs across the sector: that peer learning programs run the risk of being forever "new" with very few long-standing projects being reviewed and discussed. In other words, as part of measuring impact, peer learning programs would greatly benefit from longitudinal studies.

The challenge of implementing longitudinal studies is one of several we suggest might be considered by the peer learning community to evaluate the ever-moving currents of peer learning practice. The articles in this volume of the *Journal of Peer Learning* prompt us all to take a critical and fresh perspective of our programs, articulate what makes each unique, and develop evaluative research that enlivens our engagement and curiosity about the many possibilities in this field.

We thank our contributors for their patience as we have worked through a change in editorial composition at the Journal. We would also like to thank Dr. Bryce Bunting for his insightful, knowledgeable, and professional editorship of this journal for the past half-decade, and we wish him well in his future endeavours. A final big thank you to Amber Smith for once again carefully copyediting this issue to completion.