

Moving beyond tokenism: Defining and strengthening the relationship between PASS leaders and subject co-ordinators for enhanced outcomes

Commentary to support Poster Presentation at HERDSA, Sydney June 2017

Melissa Zaccagnini, Sian O'Sullivan and Melissa Stephen

University of Wollongong

pass-enquiries@uow.edu.au

Structured peer learning within the education sector has existed in various forms for decades, and the understandings of and implementation of peer learning as a high impact support service to enhance student learning is growing dramatically.

PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) is one of the most utilised structured peer learning models in the world. Also known as Supplemental Instruction (SI), PASS is attached to high risk subjects (those with high failure rates, high perception of difficulty or are critical to progression in a course), at key transition points in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. PASS Leaders are students who have recently successfully completed the subject and who have been selected for the role via an extensive recruitment and training process. PASS Leaders facilitate weekly scheduled group sessions, focusing on subject content delivered by the teaching team, in an informal environment where the power dynamic allows for an open learning environment driven by the students themselves (Dawson, van der Meer et al. 2014). PASS is most commonly coordinated at an institutional, faculty or school level. Consequently, PASS support is allocated strategically. The subject teaching team are advised of the allocation of PASS support prior to the commencement of semester.

The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), otherwise known as Supplemental Instruction (SI), represents a longstanding approach to Students as Partners, as the majority of the program design, manuals and resources are developed for Leaders by Leaders, with the support of University staff.

In 2016, an investigation into the connection between PASS Leaders and Subject Coordinators, conducted by requesting all parties complete reflections on the relationship indicated that in some situations PASS Leaders and Coordinators were forming strong reciprocal relationships – in which the Coordinator would support and provide suggestions to the PASS Leader around content and approach. The PASS Leader would then provide feedback to the Coordinator on the content, instructional design and areas where students were still experiencing significant challenges. This reciprocal feedback can be framed as 'pedagogical consultancy and advice' provided by the Student Leaders – as explained in the Students as Partners Framework (Healy & Harrington, 2014). However these partnerships were ad hoc and dependent on the parties involved. Approximately 20% of PASS Leaders and Coordinators reported such a partnership occurring.

The goal of this project was to further increase mutually beneficial partnership between PASS leader and academic coordinators. To do this, the PASS team embedded enabling strategies and training for both PASS Leaders and Subject Coordinators, in an attempt to further scaffold the creation of a deeper “partnership model” in order to capitalise on the extensive benefits this model could bring.

Background to the PASS Leaders and Coordinator roles in PASS

Creating and fostering connections is integral to the overall success of the PASS program. In training for new leaders, time is spent discussing the benefits of building relationships with the academic staff linked to the subjects PASS are attached to. Leaders are encouraged to first look at the similarities and differences in the roles of lecturer, tutors and PASS leaders. Ultimately, all roles wish to see students succeed at University. From before semester commences all PASS leaders must connect with their subject coordinator and lecturer. Leaders are able to introduce themselves and explain in person what their role will be. This relationship is integral to the success of the sessions. Leaders are expected to maintain contact throughout the semester as they can play a vital role in communicating concerns and issues raised by students. Lecturers and coordinators often share valuable information with the leaders which will directly benefit students. The lecturer might for example know that a particular week is difficult, or that close attention should be shown to a chapter in the textbook or what students should be studying for the exam. The PASS leader can share this information highlighting that “I spoke to John and he said everyone should be looking closely at chapter 9 and doing the revision questions on page 14’.

PASS leaders act as another layer of educating students. Whilst they are not academics and they have not graduated, they are still able to share their knowledge on having previously done the subject without directly answering questions or introducing new content. PASS leaders share and inform students on valuable ways to study and implement excellent strategies for staying on top of workload.

The role of a PASS leader can be difficult at times due to the fact that they are not able to answer any direct content related questions. It is imperative that students learn to become independent learners and PASS leaders remind students of the value of finding information themselves and fully understanding why something is as it is. Some students find this very difficult and push the leader to reteach or answer their questions. A good leader will always be able to redirect questions in a number of ways, back to the student, open the question up to the group, request students look in the textbook/ lecture notes and leaders always have the option of advising students to go to the academic staff for help.

So many students do not make use of Academic staff consultation hours. PASS leaders are able to remind students that their lecturers and subject coordinators are available and able to help them. That is what they are being paid for. Many students seem wary of this and PASS leaders are able to share their own experiences of meeting with the academic staff who are just normal people. Students often fear academic staff and the thought of approaching them one on one (especially for International students) is far too daunting. PASS leaders are

excellent role models on how to succeed in your studies. Making use of all the resources and services available on campus is something they can share with students. Showing students that it is perfectly fine to meet with academic staff, particularly if they are struggling is an important role that leaders do very well.

Challenges to building the reciprocal partnership

- Program size and scope – 51 subjects delivered over 8 onshore campuses
- New Subject Coordinators – reasonably high turnover, so they need to be aware of the program and support it before willing to form strong partnership with the PASS Leader
- New leaders – Coordinators may build a partnership and the Leader then moves on, they may not wish to spend the time building the relationship again
- Centralized model: PASS is strategically attached to subjects, at times this can place initial barriers to working alongside Coordinators as it can appear that PASS is being “done to” rather than “done with”
- PASS Leaders are not "teachers" but they are not "students", can be difficult for coordinators to establish 'rules for engagement'

Enabling Strategies

Training for leaders:

- Establishing rapport and professional working relationship
- Giving feedback in a respectful and appropriate way
- Requirement to engage with teaching team with more scaffolded suggestions for discussion

Support for Coordinators

- Introductory PDF teaching team guide
- Workshop: Introduction to PASS for Subject coordinators (targeted invitation)
- 3 x email comms throughout the semester. Updating on engagement and direct encouragement to seek feedback and suggestions from leaders

Key Learnings on building the partnership – enabling factors:

- It is easier if the coordinator is familiar with the leader (i.e. has taught them)
- More difficult where Coordinator is not lecturer or uses guest lecturers
- Feedback loop may need to be more formalized i.e. Staff facilitated meeting between Leader & Coordinator in early weeks to model level of engagement, then allowed for the rapport to continue organically

- Defining roles and discussing boundaries with all members of the teaching team is integral
- The stronger the relationship between the coordinator/ teaching team and the leader the better PASS will be for students.

References

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2014) *Engaging students as partners in teaching and learning: A guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dawson, P., et al. (2014). "On the effectiveness of Supplemental Instruction: A systematic review of Supplemental Instruction and Peer-Assisted Study Sessions literature between 2011-2010." Review of Educational Research **20**(10): 1-31.

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. London, Higher Education Academy. p24

Huang, T. K., et al. (2013). "Faculty and academic staff perceptions, experiences and expectations of the PASS Program." Journal of Peer Learning **6**(1): 118-132.