Article

Communities of practice or communicative rationality? A study of autonomous peer assisted learning

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Abstract

Defined as 'networks of learning relationships among students and significant others', peer assisted learning takes a bewildering array of forms in higher education. A useful way to conceptualise these is to draw from ideas of communities of practice and communicative rationality, with the degree of student autonomy a third key element. We illustrate this approach with a study of Kuppi, an example of peer assisted learning initiated and organised entirely by students. We interviewed undergraduate participants from six state universities in Sri Lanka and found strong support for this model of peer assisted learning from student learners and student tutors. These classes are characterised by informality and discussion, flexibility in timing and location and a focus on assessments. Students determine the content and who teaches, whilst tutors give their time without payment, out of fraternity and to improve their own learning and skills. The theory of communicative rationality helped explain much of the attraction of this form of peer assisted learning. There was evidence for a strong community of practice; however apart from peer tutors aspiring to become academics, this involved mostly reinforcement of student identity rather than transformation into emerging roles. The high levels of engagement and student autonomy shown by Kuppi challenge suggestions that peer assisted learning must be organised by tutors if it is to be effective.

Keywords

autonomy, formal teaching, Kuppi, peer teaching, self-organisation, undergraduates

Describing the diversity of peer assisted learning

Peer assisted learning is nothing new; understood broadly as the process in which people from similar social groupings help each other to learn, it must pre-date professional instruction by many millennia. It has inspired a large literature that analyses, examines and celebrates the opportunities and challenges it brings, and it potentially includes many, diverse activities. This multiplicity stems largely from the ambiguity of the terms 'peer' and 'peer learning'; Boud and Lee (2005: 503), for

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example, define peer learning very broadly as 'networks of learning relationships, among students and significant others'. Hence peer assisted learning can range from highly structured and traditional interactions, such as senior graduate or postgraduate students acting as paid tutors and mentors in classes, through to unstructured and informal ones such as spontaneous friendship groups discussing academic work (Boud, 2001). It might occur in very traditional classroom settings that are part of the curriculum, in deliberately constructed but virtual settings such as online chat groups or in entirely autonomous, extra-curricular contexts. We suggest that two influential theoretical perspectives can help to organise and conceptualise many of these practices.

The first involves the notion of learning through initiation into, and action within, communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This perspective emphasises the relational, shared aspects of education; learning is seen as something that is manifested in practice, is owned collectively as well as individually and involves a trajectory towards greater knowledge and competence within a social setting. A community of practice involves participants showing mutual engagement on a joint enterprise and using a shared language. This idea captures many of the powerful communal aspects of peer learning experiences. For example, Orsmond et al. (2013) describe how peer learning over the course of a 3 year degree helped students to transition from a 'student' towards a 'professional' community of practice. The language that students used within peer groups changed to reflect a more professional identity and they were able to draw on different aspects of their social and peer networks to help deepen and expand their knowledge. Understanding how communities of practice can help develop less experienced members draws on Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development, in which learners participate socially in practices more advanced than those they can do on their own (Vygotsky, 1978). This has been used to explain the effects of peer learning in mixed groups of peers, where some people are more competent than others (Topping, 2005), and informs many formal systems in which more advanced students are paired with less experience ones (e.g. 'near-peer tutoring'; Bester et al., 2017). A familiar example from university life is of the apprenticeship experienced by research students, for whom their peers include fellow postgraduates but crucially also – often only gradually and over time – academics (Boud and Lee, 2005).

In communities of practice without sufficient heterogeneity in experience and skills, there is a danger that participants will reinforce each other's misunderstandings and consolidate limiting identities. For example, Ashwin (2003) describes how peer learning can sometimes encourage shallow and strategic approaches focused solely on assessments. Hence ensuring that a community of practice has individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives, whilst still interacting successfully, is critical for learning. Individuals able to build new connections between disparate members are referred to as 'brokers' in the community of practice literature. Their actions help smooth the distinction between 'peer' and 'tutor' in mixed groups and some academics adopt this identity in constructing peer learning groups in their practice (e.g. Mercieca, 2017). The peer tutors who bring these advanced skills and experience often commit significant time and effort to tutoring and may not be paid, so how are they rewarded? In most cases, it seems that peer tutors recognise how engaging in teaching can help them to learn and acquire new skills. The benefits of peer assisted learning for peer tutors' learning is much discussed and is a major emphasis for academic developers who encourage peer assisted learning (e.g. Boud et al., 2014; Falchikov, 2001). A meta-analysis confirmed a significant positive outcome of peer assisted learning for the tutor's academic achievement (Leung, 2019), which was particularly strong when tutors initially had relatively lower academic achievement levels and when tutoring sessions were relatively long and infrequent (rather than short and frequent).

The second theoretical perspective comes from Habermas, who emphasised the central role of open and honest communication for ethics and epistemology. Specifically, he outlined the conditions of an 'ideal speech situation' which enables fully democratic and rational public decisions to be made through a process of 'communicative rationality'. Such a situation requires that all participants feel free to contribute, without fearing the exercise of power, using the same level of

language and referring to facts and knowledge with which all are familiar (Habermas, 1987). Whilst the theory was developed to inform political thinking its applications to education are clear (Garland, 2014; Terry, 1997). Complex hierarchies of power and knowledge characterise most higher education institutions. This makes the achievement of genuine reciprocal collegiality between academics and students difficult (Fielding, 1999); the demanding conditions of a genuinely 'ideal speech condition' must be rare when academics and students typically have very different levels of knowledge and power. Much of the peer assisted learning literature deals with how real or perceived differences in social status disrupt learning. For example Riese et al. (2012) review studies showing how differences in status interfere with group functioning. Habermas's emphasis on the importance of language and speech acts is endorsed in their finding that 'patterns of speech' were important in enabling peer learning, with successful peer groups progressing through cycles of questioning and growing refinement in language. They report that trust and learning is likely to be damaged where there are large hierarchies in status; in Habermasian terms, where 'steering systems' of power are seen to distort communication (Habermas, 1987). As the peer tutors interviewed by Hilsdon (2014: 248) said, peers are not considered to be 'snooping' on learners – in contrast to the formal lecturers operating systems of power – but are rather perceived as 'one of them and it's about helping each other'. Hence a major strength of peer assisted learning is the opportunity for students to learn together with less intimidation and less fear of explicit or implicit judgement by those more knowledgeable, experienced or powerful than them.

These two perspectives on peer learning – that it involves collective engagement in mixed communities of practice and that it involves steps towards the creation of ideal speech situations – are used in Figure 1 to help map a conceptual space for peer assisted learning.
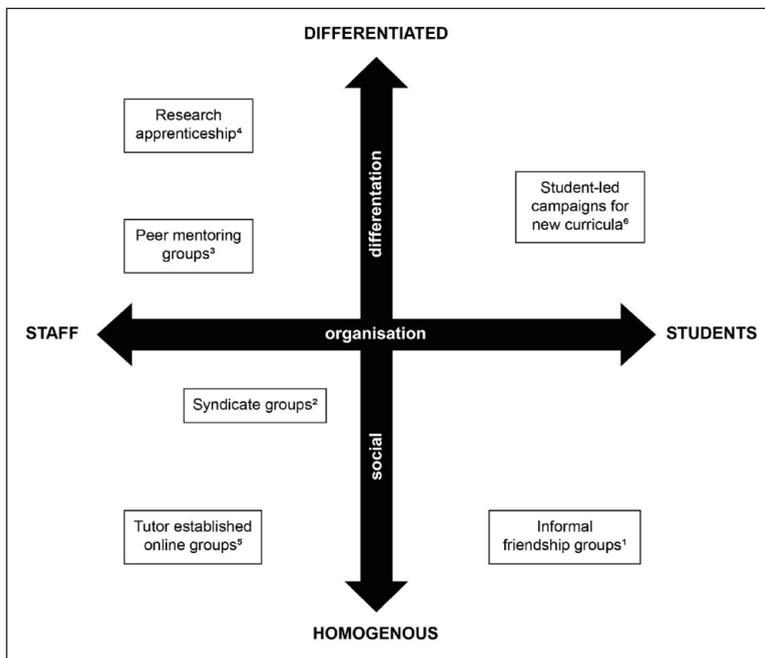
Figure 1. Types of peer assisted learning mapped against the two axes of degrees of social differentiation (from homogenous groups of peers at the same level of learning through to mixed communities of practice) and organisational agency (from entirely initiated and organised by staff through to entirely organised by students). Source: Superscript numbers are for relevant examples: [1](Petocz et al., 2014), (McLaughlin and Sillence, 2018); [2](McKerlie et al., 2012); [3](Hilsdon, 2014); [4](Boud and Lee, 2005); [5](Pettit, 2014); [6](Rethinking Economics, n.d.).

There is a clear tension between these two conceptualisations (represented for heuristic reasons only as a binary divide). If ideal speech conditions require equality and informality, then they are most likely to occur without the presence of real or perceived symbols or bearers of power and prestige. This implies peer learning will do best when academics are absent and where the peer group is as homogenous, in terms of status and learning, as possible. By contrast, if communities of practice involve less experienced members moving from the periphery towards the centre, as they understand and adopt the practices of more experienced members, then peer learning works best when there is a large mix of expertise.

The second organising axis on Figure 1 concerns the degree of student autonomy and control. Whilst most peer learning probably occurs without lecturers' support and outside of formal structures and curricula, most of the literature explores peer assisted learning as 'a didactic model initiated and administered by teachers' (Havnes, 2008: 195). If peer assisted learning is left to emerge organically among learners, then its benefits will be restricted to those students with the time, resources and initiative to engage in it. Hence Boud (2001) argues that peer learning requires the engagement of lecturers to make it effective and that it is incumbent upon them to design curricular and teaching activities that use it. Presenting peer assisted learning as an activity for lecturers introduces a second set of tensions. If peer learning allows students to escape the 'steering systems' of formal curricular and teaching, then peer assisted learning as an extension of the curriculum may become a way of colonising this relatively 'communicatively ideal' space and diminishing its liberatory potential. There are practical considerations here as well. The literature on peer learning often focuses on the efforts that academics need to make to support it (see e.g. Hammond et al., 2010; Topping and Ehly, 2001) and emphasises the difficulties that staff experience in facilitating effective sessions and programmes (e.g. Boud et al., 2014). Hence whilst peer assisted learning could, in principle, help reduce the pressures on busy teaching staff, if the main responsibility for its organisation, management and evaluation lies with academics it may impose additional burdens. For example Kodabux and Hoolash (2015) investigated lecturers' perceptions of a student assisted learning scheme and the reasons why adoption of it had been low. They found academics reporting that involvement in the scheme was too time consuming.

One attraction of peer assisted learning for students may be that it allows them to tailor the timing and nature of sessions to suit their needs and learning preferences, which is not always possible in the formal timetable. For example, dispersed learning, stretched across a whole semester, is typical of formal classes. In an experiment in the co-creation of learning with students, Huxham et al. (2015) found that students willingly increased their hours of learning and changed other commitments because of a desire to allow intensive, blocked sessions in which topics could be properly examined. They were clear that they preferred this mode of attendance. Examples of genuinely transformative learning are rare and intensive teaching is one of the ingredients that can produce it (Sterling, 2011). Hence student autonomy, exercised through peer assisted learning and now facilitated in new and flexible ways via social media (McLaughlin and Sillence, 2018), can allow an escape from structures that limit or fragment learning; if the peer assisted learning is administered by staff then these structures may be inadvertently reproduced.

There is therefore a need for more research on peer learning outside of formally mandated and controlled curricular spaces. One example of such learning is the long-established and widespread form practised in Sri Lankan higher education known as Kuppi (de Silva et al., 2017; Kommalage and Thabrew, 2011). This is a Sinhala word, originally meaning phial or vial; when prefixed as lampu-kuppi, it also means a small lamp with kerosene to give some light. This mode of learning is a well-established tradition; there is no published evidence on how long it has existed, but the anecdotal memories suggest it has been part of the culture for thirty years or more. Formal instruction in Sri Lankan universities, particularly in science and medicine faculties, is often in English.

Whilst this helps develop English language skills in students it presents a barrier to those who are not fluent; so, one role of peer assisted sessions is to literally translate academic ideas into accessible language. Kuppi classes are conducted either in or outside classrooms, for example under trees, in cafeterias and other informal spaces; circles of students gathered around one of their peers, notebooks in hand, are a common sight on Sri Lankan campuses. Classes have a 'peer tutor', that is, a student acting as a 'teacher', and 'peer tutees' who act as 'learners'. Peer tutors are not paid. The number of students in a peer assisted learning session can vary widely, from 2 or 3 up to 100, and it is not specifically aligned with the number of students who are enrolled in the lectures or seminars in the 'normal' timetabled classroom. Students themselves determine when they need a peer assisted session and where and when it should be held. The practice has moved with the times and is now usually facilitated by social media.

Kuppi occurs entirely without formal university organisation or support. As such, it presented the opportunity for a case study of peer assisted learning at the far right of our horizontal axis on Figure 1, an under-researched part of the peer assisted learning landscape. Here we describe the practice and explore the reasons why both peer tutors and peer tutees engage in this type of peer assisted learning. We look at the strategies that are used, the knowledge or skills gained by tutors and tutees and the differences between the type of learning that takes place in 'traditional' lectures and that which takes place in peer assisted learning.

Methods

Institutional context

We selected six of Sri Lanka's 15 state universities. Target institutions were chosen in order to sample across institutional ages and across geography. The total undergraduate population in each sampled university ranges from approximately 7000 to 9000, while the undergraduate population of each faculty varies from 500 to 2000.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview was used, with six main questions probing the areas of interest as described above; questions were initially derived from informal conversations with students and the personal experiences of one of the current researchers. Pilot interviews, to check that questions were understood as expected, were conducted using face-to-face interviews and audio-recordings with three undergraduates of one university. Here, 'standard lectures' refer to the lectures conducted by the lecturers recruited by the university and taught according to the specified regulations and within the specified time schedules. These lectures are usually one 2-hour period per week for one course, and a one credit course should have 15 hours of direct face-to-face contact hours of lecturing/seminars/discussion sessions with the lecturer (this allocation does not include the office hours that lecturers make available). The number of students in a standard class varies approximately from 10 to 600.

Recruitment and participants

A request was displayed on student notice boards within the six institutions, asking for volunteers willing to participate. Twenty-seven undergraduates responded. Of these 27, two were selected from each university, based on gender balance, peer assisted learning roles and convenience for participants. Hence twelve participants were selected in total; six were male and six were female,

all were aged between 23 and 25 and were undergraduates, and they included one peer assisted learning 'peer tutor' and one 'peer tutee' within each institution. Students were drawn from five different faculties: Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Management Studies and Faculty of Law. All participants had at least 1 year of undergraduate experience.

Interviews

Each participant was interviewed face-to-face at their respective universities by the same interviewer, with interviews lasting 15–30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in either English or in Sinhala, according to the choice of the interviewee (two were communicated in English while the rest expressed their views in Sinhala). All interviews were digitally recorded and were transcribed verbatim, with the Sinhala ones subsequently translated into English.

Data analysis

We used a simple thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify key themes and ideas. Verbatim interview transcripts (in English) were initially analysed individually and independently by two researchers, who coded the data without attempting to fit it into an existing framework and sorted data into key themes, based on the frequency of their occurrence in transcripts but also on the strength of expressed opinion and expressed importance of them to participants. Themes were then compared, with a subsequent round of analysis aimed at agreeing the main emerging themes; because the initial analyses produced largely complementary results a single subsequent round of analysis was enough to agree key themes.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura ethics committee prior to the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. All personal and identifying information was anonymized.

Results

There was strong agreement between the themes identified in the interview transcripts and considerable overlap in themes coming from interviewees recruited as peer tutees and peer tutors; hence we do not separate out themes from those groups in the description below but do indicate where role identity is relevant. All the major themes discussed were explicitly and independently mentioned by a majority (or greater) of all respondents. Here we organise themes into four broad categories: style of organisation and teaching; ownership and motivation; content and focus and benefits for peer tutors.

Style of organisation and teaching – flexible, informal and friendly

All respondents mentioned the importance of informal language and relationships in making peer-assisted learning effective and they often contrasted this with the experience in standard timetabled classes. A typical comment was:

> The main difference is the level of connection we have with the lecturers. More often than not, we are not that comfortable with lecturers. . . .in a Kuppi, I can ask questions as much as I want and learn it (*peer tutee 1).*

This lack of comfort with lecturers came from a sense of distance and professional hierarchy, an unwillingness to expose weaknesses in class and a fear, in some cases, that lecturers would not sympathise with a student's struggle to understand. Being taught by peers removes that fear and provides the confidence and freedom to ask questions until full understanding is achieved:

> Because it is usually a peer or a friend that does the teaching, we can ask questions without having any doubt or fear. Furthermore, we only ask something that we do not understand once in a standardized lecture but in a Kuppi we can question our peers until we understand it fully (*peer tutee 3).*

This ability to question and to discuss topics was perceived as a major strength of peer-assisted learning sessions and an important weakness in most timetabled lessons:

> I think the one thing that standardized lectures lack the most, that Kuppi sessions provide, is the element of discussion. In peer assisted sessions it's more of a discussion that gets everybody to engage and discuss the concepts whereas we do not see this much in standardized lectures (*peer tutor 2*).

Participants discussed how the language used in peer assisted sessions was less formal than that in standard classes. By this they meant not only that the vernacular was appropriate for their understanding, but also that peer assisted sessions were generally held in their native languages rather than in English.

Peer assisted sessions were informal and flexible. Respondents talked about how they would keep learning (and keep teaching) until all core topics were covered. There was no sense that they were constrained by timetabling logistics. This sense of informality and flexibility extended to the organisation and timing of sessions as well as the dynamics within them, and social media now helps to facilitate this:

> If it is a small group, we will find a time that is comfortable for all of us, but if it is a large group, we will do it in a time that is convenient for most people. So [times and places differ]. For example, we did most of our Kuppi sessions at midnight. We usually did them in the hostel (*peer tutee 4*).

> We usually get notified in our WhatsApp groups when there is a Kuppi to be held. Usually it will say when where what and who does it. That is how a Kuppi is usually organized. Anyhow it is not really formal (*peer tutee 1)*.

Ownership and motivation – run by students, for students and for free

The learner control demonstrated over the timing and organisation of the sessions extends to the selection of the peer tutors themselves by the group of peer tutees:

> For example, we did a Kuppi on a management subject last week with a senior that I know. From everybody we know, we pick the one who we are most confident with to have the necessary knowledge to understand it (*peer tutee* 5).

> Usually there are ones in the batch who are known for being good teachers. Usually they are the ones who do the peer assisted sessions (*peer tutor 2*).

Usually the people who are in need of [peer assistance for learning] will determine who has more prowess in the area that they need a peer assisted session on. Then they will decide whose teaching style goes the best with their requirement and they would ask that person to do a Kuppi (*peer tutor 6).*

The major motivation of the peer tutors is to help their friends and peers; they are not paid for peer assisted sessions:

I usually teach my friends who are not able to attend lectures regularly because of so many other things they do. Some of them work and some of them play sports so it is hard for them to come to regular lectures. So, a few of my friends and I hold Kuppi sessions whenever we can to help them (*peer tutor 4).*

Content and focus - strategic and intensive

All our respondents praised peer assisted sessions for helping them to learn. Much of this was attributed to the informal and discursive nature of the sessions already discussed. However, an important subsidiary theme concerned the way sessions were more focused and intensive than many traditional lectures. For example, one tutor noted:

Basically, [peer assisted sessions] will teach a lot in a small period of time. Usually standardized lectures go about 6 months for a semester. But in Kuppi, we teach or learn the same course content within a day or two (*peer tutor 1)*.

This intensive learning was generally considered to be more effective than dispersed lectures across a long semester. There is a focus on the content of examinations and assessment in what is taught in these sessions; some participants stated that peer assisted learning sessions allowed them to focus on 'what mattered':

A Kuppi session will more or less focus on what will be there in the examination paper. In my opinion, if the standardized lectures too could give more emphasis on the exam and what will be tested in the examination, I think it would be quite useful for the students (*peer tutee 2).*

Benefits for peer tutors – learning while teaching

Peer tutors were unpaid volunteers, giving their time from a sense of fraternity and as part of a tradition of helping their peers. However, our peer tutors also felt that acting as teachers in these sessions helped them too. Most felt that teaching the material helped them to learn:

The main benefit I get is that, every time I teach, I revise the course content again and again, so I find it easy for me in the exam. . . there are lengthy materials [to learn] and the only way to learn them is to do it again and again, which I get from Kuppi (*peer tutor 2*).

Peer tutors felt that their experience would help them in the future, particularly if they wished to become professional educators:

If a person who has done [peer assisted tutoring] comes into a lecturer position, they will have an added advantage of reaching to students. Because it is not enough to know the subject matter to teach. Somebody with [peer assisted tutoring] experiences can be better equipped to teach (*peer tutor 5*).

Discussion and conclusions

Whilst various forms of peer assisted learning are common if not ubiquitous in higher education, the system described and explored in this study is unusual; it seems well-organised, effective, flexible, organic, owned and operated by students, and operating across the sector rather than limited to a single institution. If this is an accurate summary, then there are important lessons for peer assisted learning elsewhere. In addition, this study helps to illustrate the utility of conceptualising peer assisted learning using ideas of communities of practice, ideal speech and student autonomy. All respondents talked about how they needed spaces for discourse, questioning and dialogue and how these could not be found in formal classes; as such the pertinence of Habermas' ideal speech situation is clear. The consensus amongst our respondents was that there were insufficient chances for discussion in class, and that the opportunities that peer assisted learning afforded for questioning and conversation led to better learning. Linked to this is the perception of hierarchy and distance between students and lecturers which inhibits students from asking questions of their tutors, which was a major theme in our findings; such criticisms are common in the pedagogical literature from across the world (see e.g. Hilsdon, 2014). It seems that lecturers generally are still far from establishing ideal speech conditions in their normal classes and that peer assisted learning may help students to find spaces protected, to a greater or lesser extent, from the 'steering systems' that distort and inhibit communication and understanding.

As a system entirely initiated and organised by students, Kuppi is located at the far right of Figure 1. It shares this autonomous terrain with spontaneous and informal study groups, but is very unusual in being so well established, widespread, persistent and organised. Its location on the vertical axis, between entirely flat peer support and more heterogenous and complex communities of practice, is less clear. By explicitly selecting their peer tutors, students acknowledge differentiated expertise amongst themselves and identify it as a source of social capital; the system deliberately creates (or recognises) hierarchy for the benefit of learners.

Peer tutors talked about helping their friends but also emphasised how teaching others helped them to master course content and pass examinations. In this emphasis on assessments, tutors were like tutees in seeing peer assisted learning as a way to inhabit and enhance their identity as students; there was no indication here that it might be a bridge into another identity. However, peer tutors with an interest in becoming academics or teachers did talk about how peer assisted learning might act as practice and training for a future self. Hence there is evidence of peripheral involvement in a vertical community of practice for students looking for careers in teaching or academia, but for most involvement reinforced horizontal connections with their peers and their identity as candidates for assessments. This emphasis on assessment is a reminder that the effects of peer assisted learning may not always be positive. Here, students talked about how the instruction helped them pass and how formal lectures should focus more on what is in the assessment. Hence a prime motivation for peer assisted learning is to pass challenging examinations; these are not broad ranging sessions run for the joy of learning. It is possible this narrows the educational experience of some students, for example by allowing them to skip some formal classes but still pass examinations.

Three of our major themes – style of teaching, ownership and benefits for peer-tutors – fit well within the theoretical contexts of communities of practice and ideal speech situations. The fourth (content and focus) is more peripheral. It does, however, illustrate how institutional structures are often inconvenient for students and how allowing student agency can identify innovations with educational benefit. For example, several of our respondents identified the focused and intensive nature of Kuppi as beneficial in contrast to the dispersed learning, stretched across a whole semester, typical of standard classes.

What lessons might this particular form of peer assisted learning have for learning in general? One is a rebuke to the weary cynicism that many of us have experienced (and perhaps expressed) in our highly regulated, under-resourced and rapidly changing teaching contexts. Here we have a genuine example of self-organisation by students keen to learn and who are willing to help their peers, without financial gain and in a spirit of collective endeavour. These students are not the competitive individualists or spoon-fed dependants of some lazy caricatures. Could similar systems work elsewhere? There are elements of practice and features of student experience that motivate engagement with peer assisted learning which are widespread. Many students share lecture notes and create informal study groups amongst their friends. Most institutions struggle to facilitate the intensive, informal and discursive sessions – the ideal speech situations - that are most likely to generate transformative learning. Given the right encouragement, many students are willing to act as peer tutors and can benefit from doing so. Kuppi shows that students can help establish such conditions themselves. Academics in other countries should look for evidence of peer assisted learning amongst their own students and take action to support it. Whilst they are unlikely to find such a well-established culture of peer assisted learning, there may be multiple forms of peer learning beyond institutional structures and formal educational programmes (Havnes, 2008). Identifying, learning from, and nurturing these organic examples provides an alternative to lecturers constructing peer assisted learning from scratch and from above, which may foster communities of practice more likely to persist, more autonomous and less demanding of academic support.

Our study was limited in several ways. Whilst we spoke to respondents from across the country, our sample was small, and the study was qualitative in nature. We did not directly measure the impacts of peer assisted learning, either as reflected in assessment grades or more broadly on student learning. Without more data we cannot be sure that some groups are not excluded. In addition, we did not formally consider the opinions of the lecturers. The participants and students were all undergraduates. Postgraduates, particularly those on shorter taught causes, may need more structured and directed forms of peer assisted support (McLaughlin and Sillance, 2018). The participants were all in their second year of study, and experiences may vary from level to level. All these topics deserve further study.

In conclusion, we describe a system of peer assisted learning which differs from other examples in being initiated and led by students and yet also being long established, well organised and inclusive. The importance our respondents placed on informality, trust and accessible language is shared with many other examples of peer assisted learning in the literature and illustrates the utility of Habermas' ideas on communicative rationality when conceptualising peer learning. Viewing the peer assisted learning culture as a community of practice is also useful, although largely to show how it may limit or constrain some opportunities for learning. The emphasis on 'acting as a student' (particularly in passing examinations) in Kuppi illustrates how the formal curriculum strongly shapes practice even in these autonomous spaces. There may be opportunities, led by students or tutors (acting as 'brokers'), to expand the community of practice in these sessions, by including peers drawn from a wider circle demonstrating practice that goes beyond learning for assessments. Kuppi acts as an encouraging example of how students can work collectively to improve their learning with none of the organisational burdens borne by academic staff. Simply sharing that example may inspire other learners to copy it.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

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