Formality and Familiarity

A combination of approaches for the implementation of PAL on the Software Systems Framework at Bournemouth University

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A Brief History

- Trial run on Computing BSc in 2001.
- Initial problems lead to a suspension of PAL on Computing
- Resumed on BIT in 2002 and Computing in 2004.
- Courses continued to evolve
- Computing is now part of a larger Software Systems Framework with 220+ students.
- PAL is an integrated part of the Framework.
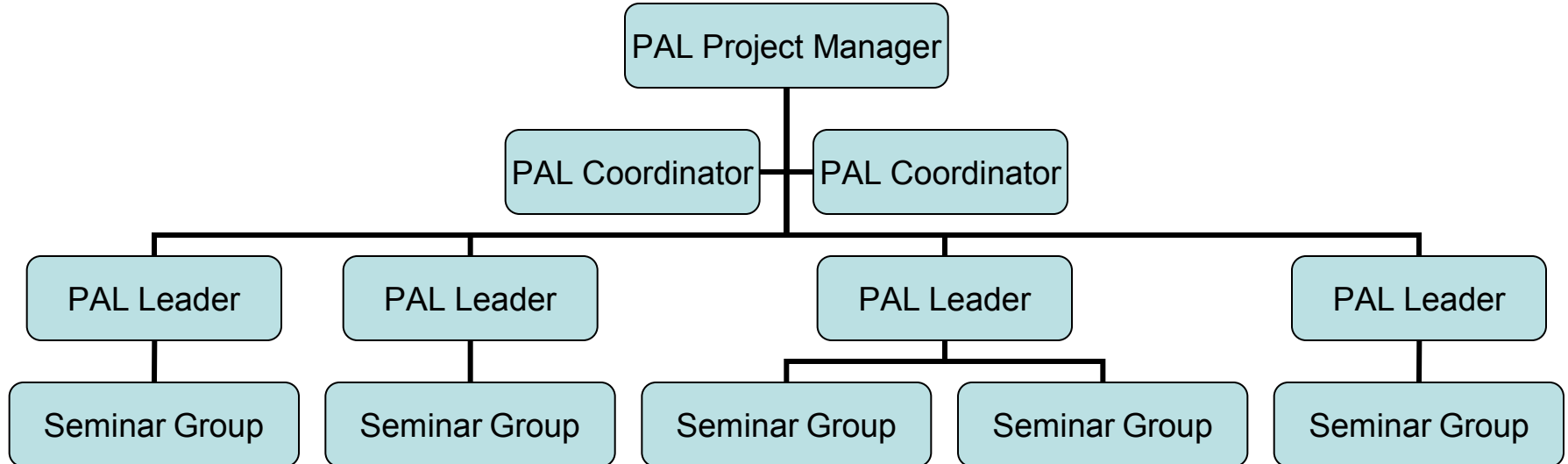
Teething Troubles

- Initial introduction of PAL
  - Started 3 weeks into term
  - Did not include PAL on the timetable
  - Sessions were arranged, advertised and promoted by PAL Leaders.
  - Was not taken seriously by all staff

Teething Troubles Resolved

- When PAL resumed 4 PAL Leaders were trained centrally.
- PAL was introduced from the first week.
- PAL was timetabled and embedded into the course.
- Registers of attendance taken.
- Staff were encouraged to participate by providing notes, work etc to PAL Leaders for inclusion into PAL sessions.

PAL Structure in SSF

```
              PAL Project Manager
                      |
      PAL Coordinator---PAL Coordinator
                      |
  PAL Leader   PAL Leader   PAL Leader   PAL Leader
      |            |       /        \        |
Seminar Group  Seminar Group  Seminar Group  Seminar Group  Seminar Group
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Challenges

- New challenges has meant large changes in the way we teach students.

- Much less emphasis/opportunity for small group teaching.

- PAL is one of the few places this has been retained.

- This has in some ways increased it's importance in helping students settle into University life.

PAL in 2008/2009

- 18 PAL Leaders
- PAL Leaders work in pairs
- Course Based PAL Co-Ordinators
- Meet regularly with PAL Co-ordinators, approx every 2 or 3 weeks or as needed.
- Trained centrally by PAL Project Manager with PAL Leaders from all over University
  - Initial and Follow-Up training.

Formality

- Recruitment
    - Application form
    - Job specification
    - Interview
    - Training
    - Paid for sessions and planning
    - Observations
- Timetabling
    - Managers need to understand
    - Correct type of room
    - Timing issues
    - Importance

Informality

- The sessions are flexible
  - Topics are determined by Students possibly even on the fly during session

- Loose planning
  - Training includes first session planning
  - Assignment Calendar used for planning

Perceptions of PAL

- PAL is often largely ignored by staff.
  - Perceived as informal gathering for students to help each other.
- Is that the same for the students?
- How do PAL Leaders perceive their role?
- How do 1st year students perceive PAL and the role it plays in their experience of University?
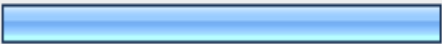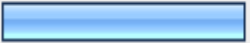
Our Initial Approach

- Surveyed students and PAL Leaders looking at attitudes towards PAL.

- 2 separate questionnaires
  - PAL Leaders
  - 1st year students.

- 60 out of 220 first year students responded.

- 10 out of 18 PAL Leaders responded.

Student Survey March 2009

The majority (80%) of respondents regard themselves as regularly attending PAL sessions.

Under 7% did not regard themselves as regularly attending.

You regularly attend weekly PAL sessions	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree	51.7%	31
Agree	28.3%	17
Neutral	13.3%	8
Disagree	1.7%	1
Strongly Disagree	5.0%	3
answered question		60

Student Survey March 2009

Between 48% and 53% regard PAL Sessions follow a **"structure"** or **"particular pattern"**

PAL Sessions follow a structure

	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree	13.8%	8
Agree	**39.7%**	23
Neutral	29.3%	17
Disagree	10.3%	6
Strongly Disagree	6.9%	4
answered question		58

PAL Sessions do not follow any particular pattern

	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree	3.5%	2
Agree	17.5%	10
Neutral	**31.6%**	**18**
Disagree	**31.6%**	**18**
Strongly Disagree	15.8%	9
answered question		57

Student Survey March 2009

Bournemouth University

Numbers of students who found PAL beneficial is statistically similar to those who believe that PAL has structure.

PAL has helped you to understand subjects you were struggling with

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		22.8%	13
Agree		**31.6%**	**18**
Neutral		29.8%	17
Disagree		7.0%	4
Strongly Disagree		8.8%	5
	answered question		57

PAL has helped you to cope with University better

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		22.8%	13
Agree		**40.4%**	**23**
Neutral		28.1%	16
Disagree		5.3%	3
Strongly Disagree		3.5%	2
	answered question		57

Student Survey March 2009

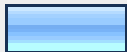Very large percentage of 1st years agree. 63% and 83% respectively.
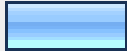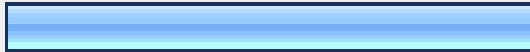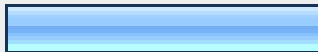
PAL has directly helped your understanding of the course topics

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		10.5%	6
Agree		40.4%	23
Neutral		24.6%	14
Disagree		15.8%	9
Strongly Disagree		8.8%	5
		answered question	57

You have found PAL Leaders to be very knowledgeable in the subjects

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		28.1%	16
Agree		54.4%	31
Neutral		8.8%	5
Disagree		5.3%	3
Strongly Disagree		3.5%	2
		answered question	57

Student Survey March 2009

PAL Provides a formal setting for an informal discussion		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		10.5%	6
Agree		47.4%	27
Neutral		28.1%	16
Disagree		10.5%	6
Strongly Disagree		3.5%	2
		answered question	57

Student Survey Conclusions

- Majority of students find PAL provides a *structure* for discussion and support.

- The structure is *formal* and well embedded in the infrastructure of the course.

- Students like this approach and for the most part attend reasonably well.

- Students have respect for good PAL Leaders

"I sometimes feel that we are leading the sessions and driving them more than the PAL leaders."

"Enjoyable!" *"Helped a lot"*

"Great PAL Leaders, knowledgeable and understanding "

What do PAL Leaders gain?

- Skill practice and improvement
  - Organisation
    - of self
    - of groups
  - Communication
  - Job application
- Subject specific knowledge revision
- Formal paid job on CV
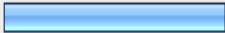
PAL Leader Survey March 2009

Improved PAL Leader Self confidence
- 100% survey result (training)

Training made you feel more confident in you role as a PAL Leader
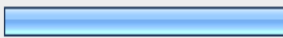
		Response Percent	Response Count
Increased my confidence a lot		60.0%	6
Increased my confidence a little		40.0%	4
Made no difference		0.0%	0
Reduced my confidence a little		0.0%	0
Reduced my confidence a lot		0.0%	0
	Any comments		0
	answered question		10

The initial training helped you to run your first PAL session
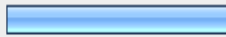
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		44.4%	4
Agree		55.6%	5
Neutral		0.0%	0
Disagree		0.0%	0
Strongly Disagree		0.0%	0
	Any comments		0
	answered question		9
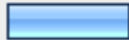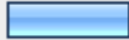
PAL Leader Survey March 2009

Each PAL Session follows a structured format

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		0.0%	0
Agree		55.6%	5
Don't Know		0.0%	0
Disagree		44.4%	4
Strongly Disagree		0.0%	0
	Any comments	view	4
		answered question	9

PAL is an informal session with no formal structure

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree		0.0%	0
Agree		44.4%	4
Don't Know		0.0%	0
Disagree		44.4%	4
Strongly Disagree		11.1%	1
	Any comments	view	4
		answered question	9

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Sessions start out with a formal plan and may change through discussion	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Agree	22.2%	2
Agree	**55.6%**	**5**
Don't Know	11.1%	1
Disagree	11.1%	1
Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0
Any comments		0
answered question		9

Conclusions

- Students like the formal structure

- First Year students like flexibility within a familiar structure

- Formal training builds confidence

- Inclusion in timetable at appropriate times improves attendance

- Strong PAL Leaders increase likelihood of successful PAL group