

## **Academic Libraries and Learning Support in Collaboration. Library Based Guidance for Peer Assisted Learning Leaders at Bournemouth University: Theory and Practice.**

### Abstract

This article begins with an overview of the University's pioneering Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PAL) and describes how in 2005/6, the Library became involved, collaborating with the PAL Coordinator to develop materials for use by PAL Leaders. PAL is intended to foster cross-year support between students on the same course. It encourages students to support each other and learn co-operatively under the guidance of trained students from the year above - called PAL Leaders. Two documents were produced to support and empower these leaders. The first, *Using the Library for Your Research*, provides leaders with key guidance information on the University Library, its resources and the services it provides. The second, *Citing References Using the Harvard System*, aims to explain and demystify the Harvard Referencing system and to encourage good referencing habits from an early stage of their course through a practical hands-on exercise. Feedback from PAL Leaders continues to inform the development of these guidance materials, in particular the referencing exercise which was reworked to better suit the needs of the leaders delivering it.

**Keywords:** peer assisted learning, PAL, peer library support, peer based information literacy

### **Background to Peer Assisted Learning (PAL)**

Bournemouth University's PAL scheme was initially based on the Supplemental Instruction (SI) scheme created by Deanna Martin in 1973 at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. SI now operates in

many other North American universities as well as those in Australia and South Africa. Similar schemes emerged in UK Higher Education in the early 1990s.

PAL has been running at Bournemouth University since 2001 when Academic Services received financial support under the Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 3 (FDTL3) from the Higher Education Academy. The main project goals were to investigate SI, identify good practice, make further modifications where appropriate, promote awareness and disseminate the outcomes to other universities.

Initially, like the SI scheme, PAL was intended to be used to reduce attrition on historically difficult courses, improve student grades on these courses and increase graduation rates (Capstick and Fleming 70). Chemistry, hospitality management and computing were the first to be selected. The PAL scheme at Bournemouth expanded considerably over the next seven years, and now operates on 39 undergraduate courses across five of the University's six academic schools.

### **PAL at Bournemouth: a changing emphasis**

With this expansion came a re-evaluation of the aims of the scheme. While the primary focus for PAL still remains academic, feedback from students, colleagues and a greater awareness of the contributions to the literature of Vincent Tinto and Manzi Yorke led to a broadening of the aims of the PAL scheme. Tinto has researched and theorised student retention over the past 30 years and his view is that a student is more likely to withdraw from higher education if they are not successfully integrated; and that integration is both social and academic (“Leaving College”; “Learning Communities” 11-13). Yorke and Longden emphasise the importance of engendering a sense of belonging amongst students from an early stage in their course. They make the important point that: ‘For some students, a sense of belonging will develop as a matter of course; for

others this may not happen unless the institution makes an effort' (Yorke and Longden 137). For these reasons we now try to make certain that, during the early stages of PAL, the PAL Leader should get the students to engage in activities such as icebreakers and social events that will ensure that the PAL group, which is based upon the student's normal seminar group, coheres quickly and the students feel comfortable working with each other.

PAL now has the following five aims which encompass both the social and the academic. The scheme is intended to help students:

- integrate quickly into University life;
- acquire a clear view of course direction and expectations;
- develop their learning and study skills to meet the requirements of higher education;
- enhance their understanding of the subject matter of their course through collaborative group discussion;
- prepare better for assessed work and examinations.

PAL has been fully integrated into course programmes, with academic staff operating as Course PAL Contacts, meeting with leaders regularly and contextualising PAL to the specific requirements of the course (Fleming and Hurne 7).

### **PAL in Practice**

Following an application and interview process, PAL Leaders are selected from applicants taken from the current years' first year undergraduate students. They are appointed to facilitate workshops for seminar

groups made up of the next intake of first year undergraduate students on their course. The Leaders become employees of Bournemouth University, receiving payment not only for each session they facilitate but also for planning time, follow-up training and meetings with their Course PAL Contact.

Having undergone a two - day initial training course, PAL Leaders are ready to facilitate weekly one hour PAL sessions throughout the year. Sessions are intended to be structured, organised and purposeful while also being supportive and friendly. In PAL, the emphasis is on everyone in the group working co-operatively and interdependently to develop their understanding. It is therefore about exploratory discussion led by the PAL Leaders. The more everyone in the group joins in these discussions, the better the sessions work.

Discussions during the early stages of the academic year are likely to focus on issues associated with settling in to the University - campus orientation, travel, accommodation, pubs and clubs, and other issues to do with being away from home for the first time. Leaders often act as an informal point of contact for these new students, outside their academic tutors, easing them into University life and enhancing their learning experience.

After two to three weeks, sessions will tend to focus more on reviewing the key points from lectures, sharing current news items of relevance to the course, academic issues such as using the Library or plagiarism, and study skills such as note taking, time management and preparing effectively for lectures. PAL Leaders perform a supportive and social role, allowing reflective learning rather than teaching.

Later in the term, discussions will focus on analysing the requirements of specific assignments with a much greater emphasis on pair or small group work. These give students an opportunity to verbalise, share ideas and acquire new perspectives, and are followed by plenary feedback to the rest of the seminar group - all managed by the PAL Leader. It is at this point that a clear understanding of how to reference the academic literature in essays or reports becomes important. PAL Leaders are encouraged to both probe and question as well as bring their own perspectives and experience to the discussions.

### **How the Library links into PAL**

As the outline above indicates, conveying information about the Library and the wider concepts of information literacy has become an integral part of any PAL programme, whether it is orientating students around the Library building or discussing topics such as plagiarism and referencing later in the term. However, this was not always the case. Before 2005, these topics were often only touched upon, and when leaders did attempt to address these subjects in sessions, they were not always successful. This was largely because PAL Leaders did not have any specific guidance material on hand to support their sessions. With hindsight, there was clearly room then for innovation and collaboration between the Library and the PAL Coordination Team.

### **The Library's Involvement**

In 2005, The University - wide working group, 'Improving the First Year Experience', identified PAL as an area that could be further developed in order to enhance levels of information literacy among first year undergraduate students. There was already evidence of other Higher Education Libraries successfully using student employees to provide support for their peers (De Jager 99-106; Holliday and Nordgren 282-283).

With the PAL Coordination Team and the Library both part of the University's department of Academic Services there were already good opportunities for co-operation.

Discussions with the PAL Coordination Team followed and they were equally as enthusiastic about collaborating. They reported that early in the term, with little in the way of assignments, finding appropriate topics for leaders to discuss in PAL sessions was sometimes a challenge. They felt that library related information would be excellent material to use early in the term and beyond, and would work to consolidate inductions that the Library Subject Teams had already delivered for first year undergraduate students in 'induction' week and further advanced sessions that would be timetabled as appropriate to the course. They also added that referencing would also be another topic for a session or series of sessions, perhaps later in the term, as assignment deadlines drew closer.

### **PAL guidance material**

Every PAL Leader is issued with a *PAL Student Leader Manual*, which provides crucial information to assist them in their role. This was developed by the PAL Coordination Team and includes suggestions for collaborative activities and advice on working with groups, prompting discussion and relaying information to them (Fleming and Hurne 4). It was decided that this manual was the ideal place to add any library related guidance material. The documentation was produced, liaising with the PAL Coordinator and other members of the Library Subject Teams to ensure the material fitted the needs of PAL Leaders across the schools.

## Library Tour Information

PAL Leaders had often provided a tour of The Sir Michael Cobham Library in their first few sessions. Student led library tours could however be a mixed blessing. For every tour that was informative and well prepared, there would be another one where leaders simply wandered around the building saying 'here is where the books are for your course'. The fact they were bringing in groups of students would also sometimes unknowingly upset other students working in the higher floors (which are set aside for silent study). Indeed, at Bournemouth University, the Library Subject Teams have never included traditional tours as part of their induction programme. They have always strived to develop self directed tour materials to operate alongside class based information literacy sessions. These have included the *Hitch Hiker's Guide Library Orientation Package* (Hutchins 93-120), a video, informative floor plans and most recently, podcasts. A number of other UK institutions have reported finding the traditional library tour untenable at induction and have also explored self directed alternatives. (Johnson 15-16; Mawson, Moore, and Pacheco 20-22) However, there are still tangible benefits from allowing new students to familiarise themselves with the Library through a guided tour. (Mosley 261-70) As they can be delivered in the context of a PAL session with a small group, they will be far more practical than any large group tours delivered by librarians. Specific guidance material was therefore developed for future PAL Leaders to make the tours more practical, informative and valuable for their recipients whilst not disturbing those working in the Library.

The document developed for the *PAL Student Leader Manual, Using the Library for Your Research* (See Figure 1) includes a section on 'Organising a Library Tour' - instructing leaders on how to plan a tour: picking up floor plans, Library subject guides, identifying resources to point out to students. This is followed by the section - 'Things to Point out on a Tour' which starts at the entrance of the building and points out the

various features in the building as a group moves across the ground floor and up the stairs to the first floor of the building e.g. Learning Support, Library Information Desk, the Subject Advice Service, study rooms.

### **Additional Library Information**

Additional sections were included to provide information for PAL Leaders to use both during a tour, and in PAL sessions. Students are initially directed to the Library's induction presentation which is available to download from the University's Virtual Learning Environment – myBU, or the University Library website. This ensures that leaders are aware of the basics as well as giving them an insight into what their groups will have already encountered in induction week.

The document then points out the array of electronic resources available to students, such as electronic journals, newspapers, bibliographic databases and ebooks (including *Ebrary Academic Complete*). It is important, particularly following on from a tour of the building, to stress how the physical library and its collection of hardcopy books and journals is just the 'tip of the iceberg'. (More than sixty percent of Bournemouth University's Library's budget goes to e-resources) In keeping with this theme of access-anywhere, any time, an explanation of the Athens Authentication System is also provided. The document recommends that leaders explain in a session about how they can set up an Athens personal account to access e-resources off campus.

The importance of the Library Subject Teams, in supporting their research, is stressed. The fact that Librarians will be delivering information literacy sessions for students during the academic year is also clearly indicated, so the PAL Leader will not feel under pressure to cover everything to do with the Library in their sessions.



The final section, ‘Background Information about the Library’, details opening hours, borrowing information and the wide variety of different learning spaces available, such as social learning areas, silent study zones and bookable study rooms which can be used to practice presentations. Though much of this latter information can be gleaned from the library area on myBU or the Library web site, it provides a useful prompt and point of reference for PAL Leaders.

Figure 1

Excerpt from *Using the Library for Your Research* from the *PAL Student Leader Manual*.

*Using the Library for your research*

**Using the Library for your research**

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## **Referencing Information**

A topic that continues to confuse many students is referencing. Following discussions with the PAL Coordinator, a document, *Citing References Using the Harvard System* was developed. This material highlights the excellent *BU Guide to Citation in the Harvard Style*, produced by the Library and additional online tutorials they have devised on this topic, such as the *Quick Guides to Referencing*. The latter includes visual examples of the most popular formats and how to produce references for them. They are also directed to the Plagiarism Guidelines that have been included in the *PAL Student Leader Manual*.

The document begins with an overview of referencing in academic writing, and the reasons for it. This is followed by resources and support available and finally a ‘Harvard Referencing Exercise’. This follows the structure of other material in the PAL guidance booklet, including information and a practical exercise leaders could employ in PAL sessions. It is this final exercise which has proved the most challenging to develop and this has undergone a number of changes since its initial inclusion in the *PAL Student Leader Manual* in 2006. These two stages of feedback from staff and students led to the modifications outlined later on this article.

## **Harvard Referencing Exercise**

A pack has been developed for each academic school which includes photocopied examples of a number of published items: journal article, book, contribution to an edited book, web page and conference paper. To prevent the possibility of giving out incorrect information, a list of correct answers for each of these examples is included. In addition, leaders are asked to provide the *BU Guide to Citation in the Harvard Style* for each student in their group, overhead projector transparencies (OHTs) and a set of OHT pens.

In the latest version of the exercise, PAL Leaders are asked to photocopy school specific examples and a list of correct answers from the *PAL Referencing Exercise Pack* to bring to a session they are facilitating.

(See Appendix 1) Leaders can obtain this pack from the Subject Advice Desk in the Library. At the start of their session, the PAL Leaders divide their group into smaller groups (pairs) in order to promote the collaborative learning ethos embedded into PAL. Students are given at least two different types of publication and an OHT slide. Leaders then instruct each pair of students to produce a reference for each as it would appear in a list of references at the end of a piece of work. Students pass on the photocopies from the *PAL Referencing Exercise Pack* to the next pair and attempt all the examples provided. The PAL Leader finally displays each of the completed OHTs and discusses them with the entire group, asking them to identify errors and suggest any corrections. The PAL Leader will be able to consult their answer sheet to guide them through this part of the session. Leaders can then distribute photocopies of the correct answers to their group members at the end. It is stressed that questions which PAL Leaders cannot answer immediately can always be referred to the Library Subject Teams. If this happens to be the case, PAL Leaders are instructed to inform their group in the next session with the correct answer/s. (See Appendix 1)

### **The Evolution of the ‘Harvard Referencing Exercise’**

The Referencing Exercise has undergone a number of changes since its initial development for the *PAL Student Leader Manual* in 2006 for example. Originally, PAL Leaders were instructed to find the examples themselves: photocopying or printing out relevant sections of a number of published items. They were to consult the *BU Guide to Citation in the Harvard Style* in order to find the “correct answers” when facilitating a session. However, observation of PAL sessions by the PAL Coordinator over the academic year and informal feedback from leaders indicated that they were struggling to locate the material needed to bring to their sessions. PAL Leaders were also not fully confident that they were providing the correct answers for their groups. Therefore, the decision was made to develop a pre-prepared *PAL Referencing Exercise Pack* including photocopies of items and answers for the leaders to bring to a session. The Library Subject Teams

assisted in providing subject specific examples to include in the pack. It is hoped that a clearer comprehension of referencing will be ensured through this changed approach.

## **Feedback**

Although there has been no formal evaluation at this stage, informal feedback from PAL Leaders and the PAL Coordination Team has been encouraged to allow continuous improvement of this guidance material. The example of the PAL Referencing Exercise demonstrates how important such feedback can be. This is reinforced by the positive response by Leaders to the reworked exercise:

The pack was excellent and the fact that there were answers with it was essential as my referencing skills aren't great!

The booklet that accompanied it was simple and effective, I think they get so bombarded at times with referencing materials that they don't know which one to use!!

The referencing exercise was a really useful session to my PAL group. It helped them to refresh their memories on the subject and introduce some to the Harvard referencing style. I ran this session at the beginning of term in the first couple of sessions. My group said it was a very good and worthwhile exercise as it made them feel more confident about referencing.

The PAL Coordination Team have also reported on the value of the document- *Using the Library for Your Research*. They assert that PAL Leaders are no longer providing aimless tours of the library, and bringing

large groups into quiet study areas by mistake and that they also feel more confident speaking to PAL groups about Library resources such as databases or e-books.

## **The Future**

PAL has been the focus of much interest in the wider Higher Education sector and Bournemouth received further Transferability Funding to help two other Universities adopt the scheme. Further Universities and Colleges have been supported on a consultancy basis and the University PAL Coordinator has discussed PAL with staff from other universities in Morocco, Belgium and Eire.

The PAL Coordination Team continue to enjoy great success with PAL at Bournemouth and are looking to exploit new technology such as the VLE, and have worked with students to produce a PAL training DVD, to operate alongside the *PAL Student Leader Manual*.

The Library also continues to build upon its work with this innovative scheme, to investigate ways of further enhancing the material that has been created. Clearly, this material cannot remain static and must reflect the needs of its users and any changes over in library provision over time. This includes the University wide adoption of a VLE with reading lists and scanned items provided at the unit level and the Library's introduction of a federated search engine. There are also plans to expand upon this in years to come by further customising the material for different disciplines such as law.

It is hoped that along with all its other benefits, PAL will also operate as an additional vehicle for information literacy, reinforcing the important work that the Library Subject Teams are carrying out for first year undergraduate students.

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#### **4. Harvard Referencing Exercise**

##### **Aim**

- To provide an opportunity for your students to gain practise at identifying and referencing different types of published materials.

##### **Time required**

½ hour – 1 hour

To save you time gathering together a range of different materials, the Subject Librarians have put together packs containing a range of examples to help your students to practise referencing from different types of publications. Additionally, to prevent the accidental proliferation of incorrect information these packs also contain the correct answers for each item.

##### **Materials required**

- Ask at the Subject Advice desk, on 1st floor of Talbot Campus Library for the **PAL Referencing Exercise pack** for your particular School
- Make some photocopies of the examples and correct answers taken from the *Exercise pack*
- Make enough photocopies of the correct answers taken from the *Exercise pack* for each student in your group
- Collect a "*Citing References Guide*" for each student from the carousel near the Subject Advice desk
- Take blank Overhead projector transparencies (OHTs) and OHT pens for students to write and display their answers

##### **Procedure**

1. Ask the students to work in pairs.
2. Give each pair photocopies of at least 2 different types of publication and an OHT slide (they'll have to take it in turns using your OHT pens).
3. Ask each pair to produce a reference for each of the examples they have been given, writing them in full on the OHT slide provided.
4. Remind them that they must first identify what types of publication they have and second use the appropriate referencing format for these publications by referring to the explanations given in the "*Citing References Guide*".
5. When they've finished, ask them to pass their photocopies on to another pair.
6. Continue until everyone has had a go at referencing several different types of publication.
7. Collect the OHT from each pair and display them in turn.
8. Ask the group to identify any errors and get them to suggest any corrections.
9. Distribute the answer sheet from the exercise pack.
10. Ask if anyone has any further questions.
11. There may well be questions you can't answer on the spot. If so, you can refer a volunteer to their Library Subject Team – and ask this person to tell the group the answer in the next PAL session.

If you have any questions about these library research guides please address to them to Steve Parton: [sparton@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:sparton@bournemouth.ac.uk)