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Flipped peer leader training: A modularised, blended and active peer leader training and development program

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Abstract*

Blended and flipped classroom pedagogical models are recognised as having the potential to deepen and enrich student learning while also being a more engaging learning experience (Partridge, Ponting, & McCay, 2011). E-learning platforms and blended pedagogies have transformed the higher education landscape, changing how teaching and learning occur along with learner expectations about the nature of their learning experience. Active-learning, collaborative learning, blended pedagogies and flexibility in deciding where, when and how they engage have now become mainstreamed (Gaebel, Kupriyanova, Morais, & Colucci, 2014). In the peer leader training and development landscape, blended pedagogical approaches are typically not applied; however, if adopted, they have the potential to similarly transform the learning experience. This article describes a student-centred blended and flipped classroom model of peer leader training that aims to establish a more flexible, connected, coherent and deeper student learning experience.

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Introduction

Providing a high-impact peer leader training and professional learning program that equips students with the necessary capabilities and mindsets to perform their role effectively, has been identified as central to the success of any peer program as it has the potential to ensure that the intended program outcomes are achieved (Karcher, Herrera, & Hansen, 2010; Esplin, Seabold, & Pinnegar, 2012). While the need for reflective and ongoing professional learning is recognised as best-practice in peer leader development (Bunting, 2014), the challenge for universities is how to deliver quality, timely and scaffolded training that enables deep and active learning within a co-curricular environment. Parallel to this conversation is the further challenge for universities around how to maximise graduate employability through providing learning experiences embedded at all levels of the university experience (Bridgstock, 2017). Peer leadership experiences provide valuable professional learning opportunities, enabling students to develop their graduate capabilities while growing their professional networks within co-curricular peer-to-peer learning contexts (Tredinnick, Menzies, & Van Ryt, 2015).

This paper reports on a university-wide model for peer leader training that applies the principles of blended learning in order to optimise learning outcomes.

Peer leader training

Safeguarding learners by ensuring that learning experiences are positive and constructive is both a responsibility and a concern for all universities. The assurance that a peer program will produce the desired learning outcomes is largely dependent on the preparedness of the peer leaders; hence, provision of a high-impact leader training and development program (Esplin, et.al., 2012).

Bunting (2014) highlights “when development of peer mentors is neglected, programs are unlikely to achieve their intended objectives” (p. 5). To be reliable, peer leader training needs to ensure leaders have the necessary skills, knowledge and mindsets required to ethically, effectively and safely undertake their role. Clearly, universities have a responsibility to ensure leaders are appropriately trained and prepared for their role.

The key challenge is how to provide rich, developmental and authentic learning experiences that enable peer leaders to learn through collaboration and reflect on their practice. A myriad of logistical constraints limit the scope for providing extended face-to-face training including: student/staff availability, budgets and timing of programs. Further, training is typically scheduled immediately prior to the start of semester or commencement of the program, necessitating a condensed block of time. These constraints result in a training program that provides more of a surface learning experience with limited active engagement. However, it is well recognised that to develop in any professional role requires a process of continuous reflection-on-action. This process is recognised as being central to acquiring and applying knowledge, and foundational to professional learning and development (Schon, 1991). In taking on a leader role, students begin their ‘professional’ learning journey as a peer leader and enabler of other students’ learning success.

Blended learning and the flipped classroom

E-learning in higher education has become mainstream, fostering pedagogical innovation that has transformed the learner experience (Gaebel, et. al., 2014). Key identified benefits of e-learning include: 1) improved efficiencies of processes (cost-effective, time-effective, sustainable and scalable); and 2) enhanced learning outcomes and pedagogical

transformation through enabling more student-centred teaching and learning practices (Kirkwood & Price, 2014). However, a blended approach (i.e. pedagogy that integrates face-to-face and online delivery methods) is considered to optimise learning outcomes (Partridge et. al., 2011).

Flipped classroom

The flipped classroom adopts a blended pedagogical approach where core content is delivered in an online environment prior to class. This approach permits a refocusing of class time to concentrate on collaborative and active learning strategies that aim to move students from surface to deep learning (McLaughlin, White, Khanova, & Yuriev, 2016; Wanner & Palmer, 2015). A key perceived benefit of the flipped model is that students are given agency to pace their pre-online learning, having time to pause and reflect on content as required. This process is considered to lead to deeper learning and understanding.

Flipped peer leader training

For transformative and deep learning to occur in their 'professional' role as a peer leader, students need time both to reflect on and actively engage in the learning process. Within the peer leader training landscape, the flipped classroom approach has the potential to similarly transform the learning experience by delivering more personalised, flexible, accessible, efficient and meaningful learner-centred leader training. The standard face-to-face and single block of time training model limits scope for students to have time prior to attendance to reflect on newly acquired knowledge and concepts. Further, as time must be devoted to content delivery, students have limited opportunities to actively engage, apply and make meaning of the concepts. In the flipped classroom model, as core knowledge and concepts are disseminated prior to attending the training day, class time can then

be devoted to program-specific problem-based collaborative learning activities, experiential role plays and social interaction. This approach allows for standardised core competency online training with a differentiated and program-situated approach for the face-to-face component.

A university-wide modularised and blended peer leader training program

QUT's peer leader training and development strategy

In 2011, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) implemented an ambitious university-wide Peer Programs Strategy that aimed to grow the scale and reach of peer programs to ensure all students had access to quality-assured peer support (Menzies & Nelson, 2012; Menzies, Tredinnick, & Van Ryt, 2015). Since its inception, the number of peer programs has steadily increased with 48 programs and 1,086 peer leaders currently part of the integrated institutional strategy. Over the next five years, it is projected that these numbers are likely to double. Underpinning the success of this strategy is the need for a robust, quality-assured and scalable peer leader training and development program that meets both the needs of students and program coordinators.

Between 2011 and 2015, QUTs centralised training model adopted a core-competencies modularised approach with content experts delivering face-to-face workshops (Van Ryt, Menzies, & Tredinnick, 2015). The model aimed to establish standardised prerequisite training for all peer leaders while improving organisational efficiencies. Training was scheduled over one to two days (role- and program-dependent) in the week prior to Orientation and focused on core competencies and program induction. Program coordinators were responsible for induction to their program, covering leader roles and

responsibilities along with team-building activities.

Ongoing evaluation and review of the training identified a number of challenges to the success of the centralised model. Firstly, increased demand resulted in the model exceeding capacity to deliver scalable and timely training. An increase in the number of programs also meant that students took on a range of roles, resulting in conflicts in their availability to attend each program's training and induction. More importantly, due to time constraints (staff and student availability, single time block), training needed to focus on covering core competency content (e.g. listening deeply, communication skills, diversity and intercultural awareness). This resulted in a surface and passive, rather than a deep and transformative learning experience, and a disconnect from their program

A further confounding issue with the model was that program coordinators had limited time to focus on developing the peer leaders' understanding of their role or to establish a team connection. Thus, the existing model did not adequately prepare students to take on their role. Stakeholder feedback (peer leaders, program coordinators and training providers) continued to highlight the desire for training to be more active, contextual and meaningful; while peer leaders also requested opportunities to connect with experienced peer leaders. Responding to the question *How might training be improved?* this sample feedback encapsulates participants' general perceptions:

Training in practical educational skills. Like, ways to effectively break down concepts and convey them in more than one way. Tips from other experienced PLFs (peer learning facilitators) on how to build students' understanding rather than simply answering questions.

Flipped peer leader training program

In 2015, a project team representing eLearning Services, training providers, students and the Peer Programs Team was formed to develop a prerequisite online core competency training program that every beginner peer leader was required to complete. The program, *Becoming a Peer Leader*, consisted of three core competencies modules:

Module 1. *Becoming a Student Leader:* Roles & responsibilities of a student leader; student code of conduct.

Module 2. *Understanding Student Identities:* Understanding cultural differences (Iceberg Model); diversity awareness & diversity @ QUT; attentive listening skills.

Module 3. *Connecting students to support:* Referral strategies and academic support services, and; Health, Safety and Environments.

Modules were designed to be engaging and to promote ongoing interaction, collaboration and sharing of knowledge and experiences through the use of online tools (e.g. Padlet and GoSoapBox). The interactive online learning tasks aimed to provide time for learners to review and reflect on content prior to attending the integrated training day, leaving class time for collaborative and reflection-on-action learning. For the purposes of tracking user completion ongoing centralised support, updating and maintenance of the online program, along with ease of access, the program was placed on the community Blackboard.

The flipped training program aims to achieve:

- Pedagogical transformation by providing a more flexible, deeper (reflective and active) and personalised (student-centred) approach for beginning peer leaders;

- Improved efficiencies (capacity, cost-effective, time-effective, sustainable and scalable);
- Role ready peer leaders that have the necessary knowledge, capabilities and mindsets to effectively undertake their role and to grow as a leader;
- Quality, consistency, removal of duplication of training;
- Embedding a more professional learning approach to peer leader development;
- A stronger peer leader network and program community; and
- Improved flexibility (complete training anytime, anywhere).

Findings: Pilot flipped training model

The blended model of online training with a face-to-face training day was piloted in 2016 with 626 peer leaders trained to take on 721 beginner roles across 33 peer programs. Stakeholder feedback about the online training has been extremely positive with the following student feedback to the question: *What was the best aspect of the training?*

Being able to reflect on my own experiences (the reflection quizzes) and being able to see other people's ideas (the Soapbox event).

The most useful part of this training was where I was taken through the different support services available to students, and shown how these services can be accessed both on campus and online.

Being able to apply it to myself - e.g. the iceberg task, helped me understand what were my own strengths and beliefs.

Peer leader survey responses about the blended training approach identified:

94% have a better understanding of what is expected of them as a student leader.

84% are more aware of how their beliefs shape the assumptions they make about others.

89% considered the online training option was convenient.

87% now have a better understanding of how to build confidence & trust. And

85% felt more able to guide and respond to the needs of other students.

Discussion

Flipped training has proven to be an effective pedagogical approach that has led to increased student leader satisfaction while providing greater flexibility, affording students time to complete and reflect on core content prior to attending the training day. As students can complete the online training whenever and wherever it suits them, this increases equitable access to leadership opportunities for a broader range of students. For program coordinators, the online training option provides increased agility, enabling peer-to-peer support to be timed, targeted and aligned with the curriculum in order to better meet students' changing needs throughout the semester (e.g. during placement). At an institutional level, the flipped model provides scalable, standardised and fiscally efficient leader training. In maturing the model, future work will focus on expanding the suite of online modules and the quality of the face-to-face training with a view to ensuring learning is active, contextualised and meaningful. Applying the principles of peer-to-peer learning, a Student Peer Train-the-Trainer Program has been piloted where experienced peer leaders are partnering to co-design and deliver the training. While the model has been

evaluated in terms of participant satisfaction, the next phase is to evaluate the training for its capacity to deepen and enrich student learning.

Conference presentation reflection

The flipped training model was presented at the 2017 STARS Conference as with attendees invited to consider questions designed to explore the perceived benefits and legitimacy of a flipped leader training model. As the program is still emerging, attendees were presented with additional details of the 2017 maturation of the training and development course and suite of blended modules. While a set of discussion questions were posed, attendees' preference was to take the opportunity to seek insights into the development of the course and online modules.

Discussion topics centred on the types of processes utilised in partnering with students; design, visualisation and aesthetics principles and considerations; the learner experience, personalisation and connectedness; and finally, university-wide scalability and budgets. A final key discussion topic focused on sharing feedback about the perceived quality of the training and the recommendation that the course should be for accreditation. Clearly, across the sector, there is a perceived need and support for blended approaches to peer leader training and development.

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