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San Jose City College Peer Leaders Share Peer-to-Peer Observation and Feedback Processes

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Abstract

San Jose City College offers a comprehensive *Certificate of Specialization in Peer Leader Training* for students who are gainfully employed in Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) and/or Supplemental Instruction (SI) programs. Led by veteran Peer Leaders (PLs), faculty and support staff, newly hired PLs begin their intensive training at two biannual orientations scheduled during summer and winter intersessions. PLTL & SI PLs are also expected to concurrently enroll in one of three 0.5 unit training courses over three semesters and attend monthly one-hour meetings with faculty coordinators and staff, while facilitating weekly PLTL and/or SI workshops. Additionally, PLTL PLs enroll in a 0.5-unit directed studies course and meet weekly with their Lead Faculty PLTL Practitioner to ensure course material and workshop activities are aligned. Among their employment responsibilities, PLs are expected to also engage in Peer-to-Peer (P2P) observations, both as observees and observers. Their active participation in P2P duty plays an important role in maintaining the quality of student participants' experiences in workshops while simultaneously furthering their professional development and is the focus of this paper.

Keywords: Peer Leader Training, Observation, Feedback Process, Improving Workshop, Improving Facilitation Skills

Introduction

Peer-to-Peer (P2P) observation and feedback are a critical component of San Jose City College's (SJCC) programs in Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) as well as Supplemental Instruction (SI). San Jose City College, located in San Jose, California, offers PLTL workshops in a variety of courses, including biology, physics, mathematics, ethnic studies, and chemistry. Following the hiring and orientation process and prior to facilitating each weekly, small-group learning workshop, Peer Leaders (PLs) complete a weekly planning sheet and participate in on-going weekly training with a faculty mentor by enrolling in a 0.5-unit directed study course (DS-98), in addition to one of a series of three semester-long PL training courses (see Supplementary Materials for more information). The latter series of courses (taken in no prescribed sequence) are designed to develop (a) leadership skills and knowledge (b) pedagogies/best practices, and (c) learning strategies in small-group peer-assisted learning. Peer Leaders who complete all three courses earn a Certificate of Specialization in PL Training.

By 2013, SJCC's rigorous PL training program began to also implement observation-feedback processes which were integrated into the PLTL and SI programs as tools to assess and improve the overall quality of PLTL and SI workshops, as well as enhance the learning experience offered to students and aid the professional development of PLs. A well-designed and prepared workshop should, in turn, improve student outcomes in these courses. How do the Peer-to-Peer observation and feedback processes work?

The observation and feedback processes are mandatory responsibilities of PLs and designed to assure and further improve the quality of small-group learning in both PLTL and SI programs. The processes are meant to improve PL facilitation skills and the learning process by student participants in SI and PLTL workshops in two main ways. First, conducting observations and providing feedback for peers illuminates potential improvements for PL Observee workshops. Second, and less obvious, the process invites self-reflection. That is, PL Observers (and/or faculty) can improve personal facilitation skills based on information gathered during an observation. Observers gain both insights into new strategies and understanding of what workshop activities students enjoy. The PL Observers might witness their peers employing a new learning technique and, upon seeing the effectiveness of that technique, adapt or adopt that technique to their own workshops in response to their students' needs. In fact, PLs are encouraged to engage in curriculum development after observing a peer's workshop. Such development can be done in collaboration with other PLs or with the lead faculty PLTL practitioner (LFPP=DS-98 instructor) or other faculty mentor and/or faculty program coordinators.

An example from the PL Observer Artie: When Artie conducted a remote observation of a PL's online trigonometry PLTL workshop, they noted how clearly and easily that PL was able to

write on the screen and share it with their workshop students. Artie learned that the PL was using a digital tablet and that such technology could be borrowed from the school's library at the start of the semester. This insight proved invaluable because all PLTL and SI workshops are currently being conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Artie had been struggling to draw chemical structures on the screen, which had thus far hindered learning in synchronous organic chemistry workshops. With this simple tip, Artie was able to plan future improvements that utilize this technology in facilitating remote workshops.

Observations and feedback sessions are generally scheduled during the second month of the semester. The processes are straight-forward and identical for the PLTL and SI programs. To start, a PL requests permission to visit a peer's workshop. Together, they schedule the observation date and (currently) share the zoom access information. In preparation for the scheduled visit, the observing PL also requests access to any relevant lesson materials, such as practice quizzes and study guides. Although the observation conducted is rather informal, SJCC's PLTL program does require PLs to complete a Peer-to-Peer Observation Form (see Appendix A for Online Workshop version; Appendix C for In-Person version). PLs are encouraged to take notes throughout the session, be attentive to the content of the workshop, and take note of effective and less effective strategies employed by their peer. The following are some questions PL observers can consider during this process:

- Are students in the workshop engaged? Confused? Bored?
- Are workshop attendees encouraged to collaborate with one another in finding answers?
- How does the Peer Leader develop rapport with their students?
- Did the Peer Leader manage the workshop time efficiently and demonstrate flexibility?

After considering those questions, PLs meet with their Observee and provide feedback. The feedback session takes place within a few days of the workshop, lest PL Observers forget too many details of the workshop. Again, the goal of the feedback process is to underscore what PL Observees are doing well and what could be further improved. PL Observers utilize effective communication skills to highlight and validate what went well and provide constructive criticism for further improvement.

PLs at SJCC are expected to practice effective communication by using the "Feedback Sandwich" model (see Appendix B) developed by Wyatt Woodsmall (Devon Partnership, 2017). Effective communication between the Peer Leaders during the feedback session is non-threatening, assertive, and clear. These terms may be familiar to readers who have been trained in nonviolent communication. Essentially, PLs use language which is descriptive, instead of prescriptive or

punitive; the focus is on what happened, specifically what went well. A reliable way for PLs to verify they are giving prescriptive feedback is by their appropriate use of the word “should.” “Should” tells another person what they ought to do; it sets up an expectation that the individual feels pressured to meet. Generally speaking, a person does not respond well to demands or inflexibility. The conversation is supportive and non-threatening, to encourage Observees to be more open to feedback and experimenting with new methods in facilitating learning among small groups of students.

To create a Feedback Sandwich (Appendix B) for their peer, PLs consult both their notes and completed Observation form. The “top bun” consists of a specific “thing(s)” that the Peer Leader Observee did well:

- Which learning activity really kept the students engaged?
- What cleared up students’ confusion?

The second portion of the sandwich is the constructive feedback, or “meat” of the sandwich. To be clear, this is *not* negative feedback. This is a time for PL Observers to give suggestions to their Observee on how to further improve. Using another aspect of non-violent communication, PLs can employ “I” statements in describing techniques that work well for them. For example, instead of saying, “You should do more activities with the students” (which is vague and prescriptive and therefore unhelpful), a PL Observer could say, “I have found it helpful to pair students up and have them quiz one another” (specific, descriptive, and more likely to be received and therefore implemented by the PL Observee).

The “bottom bun” of the sandwich is an overall positive comment about the observed workshop. With this general, closing comment, PL Observers have an opportunity to encourage their Observees and maintain the positive momentum of their workshops.

The peer observation and feedback processes at SJCC provide important opportunities for Peer Leaders to improve workshops and practice effective communication skills. The final responsibility of PL Observers is to submit their completed feedback form to a shared online folder, which establishes the completion of one of their employment responsibilities. Other and future PLs are invited to consult these documents for insights on the processes. At this time, the greatest impact (and consequent change) of the observation-feedback processes is the new practice of engagement between a designated PL Observer and Observee for one particular workshop.

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Reference

Devon Partnership/NHS Trust. (2017). Giving feedback: The Feedback Sandwich. Online at iqmentalhealth.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Leadership-Masterclass-giving-feedback-Nov-2017.pptx

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

PLTL program at SJCC: <https://www.sjcc.edu/academics/academic-programs/metas/peer-led-team-learning>). The Certificate of Specialization in Peer Leader Training as well as the three courses that lead to this certificate are included in this link.

Supplemental Instruction program at SJCC: <https://www.sjcc.edu/academics/academic-programs/metas/supplemental-instruction>

Peer Leader application form:

<https://fs30.formsite.com/seherawan13/PeerLeader/index.html>)

Appendices

APPENDIX A Peer-to-Peer Observation Form (Used for online workshops)
Observer:
Date of Observation:
Time:
Peer Leader (Observee):
Course:

No. of students attending:			
Instructions: Place an X in the respective column -- the Peer Leader "Has Met" the quality or "Has Yet to Meet" the quality. Comments required for each row. If not observed, type NO.			
PLTL Quality	Has Met	Has Yet to Meet	Comments
Session began on time			
PLTL Attendance Sheet filled in			
PLTL Leader prepared			
PLTL Weekly Planning Sheet available (for peer review)			
Agenda set at beginning of session			
Students did most of the talking (helping each other)			
Varied pedagogy/ interaction patterns present (planning sheet)			
Effective use of questions (open-ended, higher-level)			
Leader used appropriate wait-time			
Leader redirected questions, when appropriate			

PLTL Quality	Has Met	Has Yet to Meet	Comments
Appropriate processing activities used			
If needed, the leader demonstrated flexibility			
Leader's plan was appropriate & sufficient for the session			
If applicable, were prepared worksheets helpful?			
Students referred to the textbook and/or lecture notes			
Study skill tip offered/discussed List example:			
Leader involved all students			
Leader addressed students' needs and questions			
Leader knowledgeable of content material			
Leader set appropriate tone for the session			

PLTL Quality	Has Met	Has Yet to Meet	Comments
Time managed efficiently during session			
Summary/Closing activity completed			
Session ended on time			
Students were satisfied with the session			

<p>APPENDIX B</p> <p>Feedback Sandwich</p> <p>Plan to further Improve Student’s Workshop Experience</p> <p>(The Peer Leaders complete this plan together)</p>	
Date of PL consultation:	
1 (or more) specific things that went well	
Note 1 area for improvement	
General positive comment	

<p>APPENDIX C Peer-to-Peer Observation Form (Used for In-Person workshops)</p>
Observer:
Date of Observation:
Time:
Peer Leader (Observee):
Course:
No. of students attending:
Instructions: Place an X in the respective column -- the Peer Leader "Has Met" the quality or "Has Yet to Meet" the quality. Comments required for each row. If not observed, type NO.

PLTL Quality	Has Met	Has Yet to Meet	Comments
Room arranged for group work			
Session began on time			
PLTL Attendance Sheet filled in			
PLTL Leader prepared			
PLTL Weekly Planning Sheet available (for peer review)			
Agenda set at beginning of session			

PLTL Quality	Has Met	Has Yet to Meet	Comments
Students did most of the talking (helping each other)			
Varied pedagogy/ interaction patterns present (planning sheet)			
Effective use of questions (open-ended, higher-level)			
Leader used appropriate wait-time			
Leader redirected questions, when appropriate			
Appropriate processing activities used			
If needed, the leader demonstrated flexibility			
Leader's plan was appropriate & sufficient for the session			
If applicable, were prepared worksheets helpful?			
Students referred to the textbook and/or lecture notes			
Study skill tip offered/discussed List example:			

PLTL Quality	Has Met	Has Yet to Meet	Comments
Leader involved all students			
Leader addressed students' needs and questions			
Leader knowledgeable of content material			
Leader set appropriate tone for the session			
Time managed efficiently during session			
Summary/Closing activity completed			
Session ended on time			
Room left neat for the next workshop or class			
Students were satisfied with the session			