Advances in Peer-Led Learning

Number 2 Fall 2022 Article 7

Student to Coordinator: My 20-year PLTL Journey

Jonathan M. Meyers

College of Letters and Sciences
Columbus State University
Columbus, Georgia 31907
meyers_jonathan@columbusstate.edu

Recommended Citation

Meyers, J. M. (2022). Student to Coordinator: My 20-year PLTL Journey. *Advances in Peer-Led Learning, 2,* 96-100. Online at https://doi.org/10.54935/apll2022-01-07-96

Advances in Peer-Led Learning
2022, Number 2, 96-100

Student to Coordinator: My 20-year Journey

Jonathan M. Meyers

College of Letters and Sciences
Columbus State University
Columbus, Georgia 31907
meyers_jonathan@columbusstate.edu

Abstract

Peer-Led Team Learning has proven to be an inextricable part of my academic and professional journey. This essay describes my journey from a freshman chemistry major and workshop student to Assistant Dean and PLTL program coordinator, and the people who helped me along the way.

Keywords: Workshop Leader, Peer Leaders, Super Leader, GED diploma

Introduction

Looking back on our journeys we can often point to inflection points that altered our paths in noticeable and consequential ways. Sometimes these inflection points are a result of preparation and planning. Other times, they are fortuitous encounters beyond our control. Such is my experience with Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL).

I enrolled in my first chemistry course at the University of West Georgia (UWG) only to satisfy the requirements to become a high school math teacher. I was unaware that Dr. Lucille Garmon was piloting PLTL for the Principles of Chemistry sequence. However, I was immediately enamored with the program and thoroughly enjoyed my time in the workshop sessions. The workshop experience, coupled with the enthusiasm of my instructor, Associate Professor Dr. Andrew Leavitt, convinced me that I wanted to become a chemistry teacher. I changed my major from math to chemistry and experienced my first inflection point.

After passing the Principles of Chemistry sequence, I was recruited by Dr. Garmon to become a workshop leader myself. Note that I struggled to be admitted to a four-year university because I used GED (General Education Development) certification in place of a traditional high school diploma. I bore a severe case of imposter syndrome, so the sense of belonging that came with being recruited cannot be overstated. Understanding that this would be great preparation for my own teaching career, I immersed myself in the program. Like many others (Parente, 2012), I took full advantage of the PLTL experience. I led as many workshop sessions as I could, volunteered to help update the workbooks, attended all available trainings, and traveled to conferences in Alabama and Montana.

It soon became possible to integrate my involvement in PLTL and my training in the chemistry program. The constant review of general chemistry concepts as a workshop leader and the introduction to metacognition (Goos, 2002) helped me to excel in my upper-level chemistry courses. Additionally, while I was conducting laboratory work to fulfill the requirements of the American Chemical Society certified Bachelor of Science degree, I was also conducting research with Dr. Garmon to evaluate the effectiveness of PLTL through an analysis of grades in the Principles of Chemistry sequence, to see if there was a correlation between academic indicators such as High School Grade Point Average (GPA) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores with success in introductory chemistry courses. This involvement and commitment led to my second major inflection point. With encouragement from the chemistry faculty, I decided to forgo my dream of becoming a high school teacher and replace it with the goal of becoming a university chemistry professor.

The young man who had started his collegiate career with a GED was heading to graduate school!

My first year in graduate school at Indiana University was a major adjustment. Being surrounded by students who also excelled in chemistry, I felt my old self-doubts and feeling of inadequacy return. The one bright spot was being an Associate Instructor. Unlike the majority of my new peers, I felt completely comfortable with the Principles of Chemistry content we were assigned to teach in both laboratory courses and recitation sections. My time in PLTL had provided me with a great foundation. Word quickly spread among the undergraduates: my recitation sections ran out of seats and students were sitting on the floor! That is, until the Fire Marshal gently reminded me that there were seating capacity limits for a reason. Despite the snafu with the Fire Marshal, I was recognized with the Associate Instructor Award in 2007 (Indiana University, 2022).

I was fortunate to pursue my Ph.D. and post-doc under the direction of Dr. Richard DiMarchi at Indiana University. His close relationship with the pharmaceutical industry opened up new and exciting doors for me. However, pursuing a career in the pharmaceutical industry would require abandoning my dreams of being a university professor and impacting students. Alas, that sacrifice would have been too much and I started searching for academic jobs, so once again my participation in PLTL became an advantage.

After a year as a lecturer in the Department of Chemistry at Coastal Carolina University, I was invited to join the Department of Chemistry at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia as an assistant professor on the tenure track. While at CSU, I advocated for the introduction of a PLTL program to help our students in the Principles of Chemistry sequence. Despite repeated attempts, lack of faculty buy-in and funding stymied all efforts. I passionately pursued other community building activities that did not require as much buy-in and funding. I worked to build a robust first-year experience. As a first step, I proposed a seminar course for all of our incoming chemistry majors. Many students must delay taking our Principles of Chemistry sequence pending completion of math requirements. This seminar course is a way to assimilate them into the department and expose them to research opportunities in their first semester. Simultaneously, I started a volunteer peer mentor program, Team Delta G, that pairs upper-level chemistry majors with first year students. The goal was to help foster a sense of community in the department. In the second year, we added the mentor program as a component of the seminar course. We average around 25 freshmen and ten volunteer mentors every fall. Our original model has now been adopted by five other departments in the college.

In my second year, I became the faculty advisor for the student chapter of the American Chemical Society. This group has grown to include about 30 members annually and hosts a range of outreach activities and an annual chemistry awards ceremony. I successfully petitioned for a chapter of the chemistry honor society Gamma Sigma Epsilon that now inducts about ten outstanding juniors and seniors each year. To further establish a sense of belonging and community, I started hosting monthly "Caffeinated Conversations" which are informal social gatherings of faculty and students. This quickly became a student favorite with around twenty chemistry majors and faculty congregating for snacks, coffee, and laughs. All of those activities can be traced to my time in the PLTL program at UWG and trying to replicate the sense of community that was fostered by the workshops.

The latest inflection point came this past summer. I was selected to become the inaugural Assistant Dean of Strategic and Student Initiatives for my college. This promotion coincided with phase two of a strategic realignment process being spearheaded by the University System of Georgia. One of the major objectives of the realignment is to identify barrier courses that are hindering student academic progress toward degrees. Not surprisingly, my mind returned immediately to PLTL once again.

I spoke with the new Dean of the College of Letters and Sciences, Dr. Annice Yarber-Allen, and shared the benefits and challenges of the program. Seeing the possibilities of increasing the percentage of productive grades in STEM courses, she readily agreed to allow me to pilot the program out of the Dean's office and hired Mr. Tobias Postell, a graduate student in the school of Education and Health Professions, to assist in getting the program up and running. With the Dean's support, both the Biology and Chemistry Departments have offered to pay the workshop leaders' salaries for one semester as we run the pilot programs. This will cover three sections of Principles of Chemistry 1 and three sections of General Biology 1. The combined enrollment for these courses is capped at 250 students in the spring (72 biology, 178 chemistry). The chairs of both departments have agreed to fund the pilots for one semester and evaluate the data to determine the future of the program. Confident that we will be able to demonstrate a suitable improvement in productive grades, we have already begun preparing PLTL workbooks to sell and fund workshop leader salaries in future semesters.

The support from the greater PLTL community has been very valuable as we march towards our spring kickoff. Dr. James Becvar, faculty from the University of Texas, El Paso, Dr. A.E. Dreyfuss, learning specialist from the Peer-Led Team Learning International Society, and Jose Alberte, former PLTL Program Director in Biology at Florida International University, have graciously donated materials and advice (Orozco, 2019).

Recently, Tobias and I visited Dusty Otwell at UWG to sit in on workshops and observe their program in action. We left with a plethora of material and a renewed enthusiasm for PLTL at CSU.

So now as we approach the Spring 2023 semester, my PLTL journey has come full circle. Tobias and I are submitting an IRB application to collect data pertaining to students' perceptions of learning in the introductory biology and chemistry courses as well as measure the effects of PLTL on the percentage of productive grades. It is our hope that the results will help to convince the faculty to make PLTL a permanent part of their pedagogy. In the meantime, I am looking for the next inflection point in my PLTL journey.

Acknowledgments

To Dr. Lucille Garmon for introducing me to PLTL, Dr. James Becvar and Dr. AE Dreyfuss for their encouragement, support, and PLTL materials, Ms. Dusty Otwell for graciously hosting my team and sharing her PLTL materials.

References

Goos, M., Galbraith, P. & Renshaw, P. (2002). Socially mediated metacognition: creating collaborative zones of proximal development in small group problem solving. *Educational Studies in Mathematics, 49,* 193–223. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016209010120d

Indiana University. (2022) *Awards: Department of Chemistry*. Chem.indiana.edu/graduate/awards/

Orozco, C., Muniz, J., Aranda, A., Montes, M., & Becvar, J.E. (2019). Partnering in developing a new PLTL program at a neighboring institution. *Eighth Annual National Meeting of the Peer-Led Team Learning International Society*, Indianapolis, IN, June 6 -9. https://pltlis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PLTLIS-2019-Conference-Presentations.pdf (p. 25).

Parente, A.D. (2012). The scholarship of Peer-Led Team Learning: My progression from student leader to faculty. *Peer-Led Team Learning: The experience of leading*. Online at https://pltlis.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Experience-of-Leading-Parente-The-Scholarship-of-Peer-Led-Team-Learning.pdf