



## The Impact of Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) on the Life of a Latina

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# The Impact of Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) on the Life of a Latina

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## Abstract

As a Latina at a Hispanic Serving Institution, I joined the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program at the University of Texas at El Paso to overcome my language insecurity, gain confidence, persevere, and become a more successful student. Peer leading has helped me boost my confidence, gain better communication and time management skills, learn to work under pressure, manage difficult situations, and improve my ability to work with diverse students. In addition, it increased my sense of responsibility. The PLTL program is advantageous for both students and Peer Leaders alike because each group learns from the other while overcoming challenges together. Peer Leaders learn to communicate effectively while allowing space and time for students to make mistakes, collaborate with one another, and learn through engaging activities. As a Latina Peer Leader, I was also able to foster collaboration between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students, promoting inclusion in a friendly workshop environment that promoted high participation.

Keywords: Latina, Peer Leading, Language Barrier, PLTL, Confidence, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

I was born in El Paso, Texas but grew up in Ciudad Juárez, adjacent to the border between Mexico and the United States. I have lived my whole life in Mexico, immersed in the wonderful Mexican culture and traditions. To seek a better education, I chose to cross the border and attend an excellent university, The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). I wanted to attend UTEP since it is close to my home and I had heard that it provides students with amazing opportunities. Initially, I did not have enough money to go to UTEP, so I decided to study in Mexico for a year and then transfer.

When I got to UTEP one of the biggest challenges that I faced was the English language. Until high school I attended private bilingual institutions. I only used English when reading textbooks and speaking in school. With little regular practice, I was embarrassed to speak in English. I was aware that I had an accent and that I sounded like a book because I never had any social activities that required me to communicate in conversational English. This situation worsened: my first year at UTEP was online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. My performance at school was fine since I have always been a dedicated student, but I really struggled with the language and concepts in English.

One course I took online was General Chemistry I (CHEM 1305) which included a weekly workshop session. I fell in love with the way the workshop program was structured. As a student, I enjoyed first-semester General Chemistry workshops because each was a personalized session in which we were able to review the content through fun educational activities and collaboration with others. After seeing how it helped me and other students, I wanted to be part of the positive impact that the program has on both Hispanics and Non-Hispanics.

I decided to challenge myself and join the program. The Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program has had an enormous impact on my life as a student, Peer Leader, and Latina in STEM (Rodriquez, 2021). At UTEP, there is no other program that could compare to the General Chemistry PLTL program since it helps train prospective leaders to help other students through teamwork and active learning. When I got the program acceptance email, I could not believe it. Before being selected as a Peer Leader, I had not encountered such a special opportunity.

Before becoming a Peer Leader, I was a different person. I typically restrained myself from learning by engaging with new and challenging experiences. Language and prejudice were my first two obstacles. I was afraid of speaking English because of my accent and was

afraid of getting rude comments from people if I made pronunciation mistakes. Overcoming this fear initially seemed impossible.

The PLTL program gave me the opportunity to practice my English language skills: as I facilitated the workshop I discussed and reviewed difficult chemistry concepts with the students. I really enjoy explaining chemistry material and showing multiple ways to understand concepts. I gradually gained more confidence in myself and my abilities.

The PLTL program has a significant impact in helping students practice and feel comfortable with the English language. Games are a collaborative tool that also helps Hispanic students overcome feelings of insufficiency and embarrassment when speaking English. As a Latina, I was able to clearly notice when my students were afraid or reluctant to speak English because I had been in the same situation. I knew it was a burden that many of us Latinos carried due to our awareness and apprehension about mispronunciation. By its very nature, the PLTL workshop involves constant discussion, questioning, and explanation; the workshop supplies exactly the medium to address and overcome this problem. I had the privilege to experience and see the progress my students and fellow Peer Leaders made in overcoming fear and improving their English language communication through the PLTL program.

My fellow Peer Leaders were very welcoming and made me feel safe and accepted. After beginning to communicate better my attitude changed. Suddenly, I did not think of myself as the only Latina student struggling through college, which made me feel welcomed.

With the help of discussions with Peer Leaders and faculty, I was able to build a bridge between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students while breaking down language barriers through activities such as icebreakers. I was also able to oversee the challenging situation that arises having non-Hispanic and Hispanic students working together in a workshop. The student body at UTEP matches the demographics of El Paso, about 80% Hispanic. Workshop composition varies since students register for classes based on their schedule availability. During my first semester as a Peer Leader, the majority of the students were Hispanics so I observed that the use of Spanish often left non-Hispanics feeling neglected. But during my second semester, some workshops had more non-Hispanics and others had more Hispanics.

As mentioned, UTEP is located on the border, and there are students from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico like myself who also experience a language barrier when learning new concepts (Rodriguez, 2021). To address this situation, during office hours I would explain the content to Hispanic students in both English and Spanish to help them become more

familiar with terms that can be quite different in both languages. As the Hispanic students reviewed the content in Spanish, they improved their understanding of the concepts.

The Peer Leader must carefully plan and schedule activities and games, and attend to managing the allotted time to maximize the workshop experience for students. The flow of workshops will always depend on the students, but the needs of each workshop are different. I always prepare a plan before the workshop and I know which topics to prioritize and how to optimize learning with time constraints. When I create and conduct games that cover specific topics, I can help my students review content and keep them engaged. This is a behavior management tool that enhances teamwork and participation while saving time. Students are able to ask their classmates questions during these activities to promote a supportive and amicable workshop session. I was able to break down the barrier between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students through activities to promote a sense of inclusion in the workshop.

Students often asked interesting questions that I had never thought about. Because Peer Leaders are exposed to students with multiple questions and diverse ways of thinking, we need to be capable of working under pressure to answer those questions quickly and effectively. Sometimes it can be frustrating that students do not understand the material, but I persist and do my best to help and support them.

I have always loved to teach and as a consequence, I am very patient when explaining something to my friends or people close to me. I learned to listen considerately to my students and analyze what they needed to help them succeed in understanding. But with a group of fifteen students in a room, I found that patience and perseverance are key for the success of the workshop, even when difficult or challenging situations arise. An example of working under pressure is effectively handling a student who disrupts the friendly environment in the workshop or makes comments that may be hurtful to other students. I found that successfully addressing these situations while keeping a professional attitude can be particularly challenging.

A leadership skill I learned is setting boundaries, working with students but making them realize that I cannot do everything for them. "We need to let the students know that we are here for them and let them reach out to us whenever they are ready." This practical thought was one that a Peer Leader said to me in a group discussion. My most recent semester as a Peer Leader was more challenging than in the past. I had a student who was difficult to reach. The student was frustrated and did not want to follow the workshop routine. It was challenging for me as I had never managed a situation quite like this. After trying different strategies like asking the student questions, and playing games, I came to the

following conclusion: I was forcing things on the student. I learned that the student was having a difficult time and needed to work things out. The student began attending office hours and was improving, but unfortunately, decided to drop the course. I learned that some situations are beyond our help and that the only thing left to do is let our students know that we will be appropriately supportive. This challenging situation honed my ability to work with students having difficulties. It helped me understand them better as I honestly considered what I might do another time with a similar situation.

I used to think there was a big gap between students and professors, making each group unreachable for the other. The PLTL program provided constructive experiences in meeting twice a week with professors and other Peer Leaders. These meetings promote a closer professional connection that enhances communication between Peer Leaders and faculty members. Dr. Becvar, a distinguished professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, would always challenge the Peer Leaders at the weekly meetings into thinking about how we could be innovative and help the PLTL program grow in quality and team learning techniques. Dr. Becvar motivated me to always try to be the best version of myself as a person, student, and Peer Leader. He and others motivated me to do my best and think creatively and critically.

In summary, peer leading has helped me improve my ability to work with diverse students, boost my confidence and better manage time. In addition, it increased my sense of responsibility to communicate information in an easy and understandable way while allowing for space and time for students to make mistakes, collaborate with one another, and learn through fun and engaging activities. The PLTL program is a win-win for students and Peer Leaders since they learn from each other. Through the activities and situations that I have met because of peer leading, I was able to overcome challenges while helping students understand chemistry. The abilities that I gained from the program were key for my transition to work in a research laboratory as an undergraduate student. In the research laboratory, patience and communication are crucial factors that affect the success of the research. In addition, the confidence to speak up and ask questions are important tools that will help me achieve my full potential as a Latina in STEM. These were examples of how the PLTL program has helped me develop professionally and personally. Peer leadership helped me grow in every area of my life.

I want to dedicate this essay to all the Latinx who have felt discouraged or afraid of speaking the English language because of the fear of being judged due to having an accent or making pronunciation errors. In addition, through my writing and personal experience, I want to communicate to the readers of this journal never to belittle yourselves because of

your background. Diversity and acceptance are key to making a cohesive, respectful, and safe community for everyone.

As a Peer Leader, I was able to do what I loved, meet amazing people, and make valuable contributions to the education of other students. Becoming a Peer Leader was the best decision that I could have ever made.

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### Reference

Rodriguez, V. L. (2021). General Chemistry Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) Program at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) for Fall 2020. *ADVANCE Journal*, 2, 3. <https://doi.org/10.5399/osu/ADVJRNL.2.3.12>.