



Introduction to Training Peer Leaders Workshop-Style at the University of Houston-Downtown

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Abstract

The training of Peer Leaders at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) differs from other institutions that have implemented Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL). For over a decade, peer leader training has been treated as its own kind of workshop. This requires the position of a training coordinator, an experienced peer leader whose job is to prepare incoming peer leaders in how the workshop is supposed to be conducted, as well as to consider possible scenarios that may occur and other considerations that peer leaders may encounter when working with other students. Facilitating the preparation of peer leaders in the same workshop style that they would use helps to build camaraderie between the novice peer leaders and lets them experience the group learning environment firsthand before running workshops on their own.

Keywords: Peer Led Team Learning, Workshops, Training, Leadership, Mentorship

Introduction

Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) has been in practice at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) for over two decades guided by Professor Mitsue Nakamura of the Department of Mathematics. When she started the program, there was no formal coordinator position for the training of peer leaders (PLs), and they were supervised and trained by Professor Nakamura. She then trained the first peer coordinator who then began to train other new peer leaders. By having the training be led by a fellow student, the peer leaders in training are comfortable expressing themselves and feel at ease participating in the workshop setting.

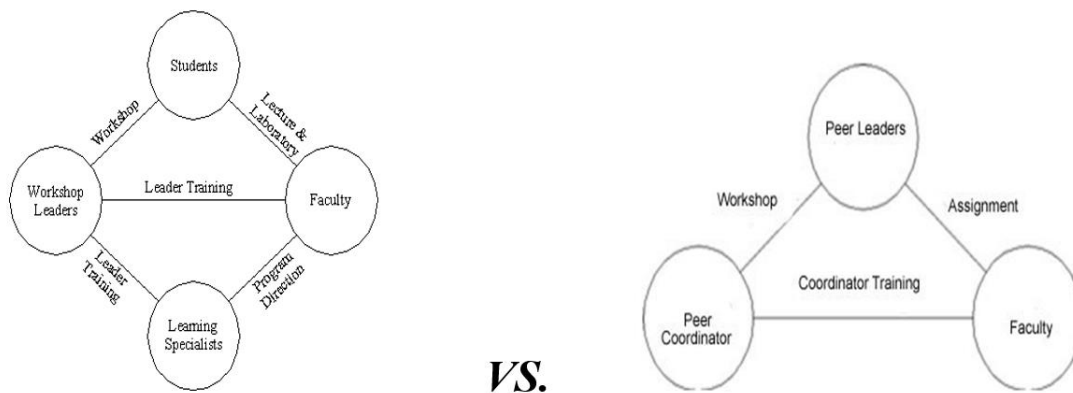


Figure 1. The original PLTL model (~ 2000, left) as compared to the modified UHD PLTL model (right)

Scheduling of sessions

To become a peer leader at UHD, one must first go through a period of training over 11 weeks, in either the fall or spring semester. Each week, the novice peer leaders meet for one hour with the training coordinator to cover a different topic. These students meet with the coordinator prior to the official start of the training sessions to decide on a time and day to accommodate everyone's schedule, taking into account the academic calendar. In some cases, two sessions may be scheduled back-to-back. Such situations are mentioned to the student peer leaders for their agreement in case they have other responsibilities prior to or after the regularly-scheduled session. Having flexibility with scheduling is another plus to having the training led by the peer coordinator, as they are able to make these changes as long as all the participants are in agreement.

During the summer semester, the training period lasts only one month. In the first week, convenient meeting times are discussed, and an introductory session, led by Professor

Nakamura and the training coordinator, provides the overview of assignments and logs. All 11 sessions are still held, usually in two-hour sessions twice a week.

In the spring semester of 2020, training workshops transitioned to the virtual environment. The training materials were adjusted by the coordinator to suit the online sessions. By continuing to conduct the training virtually beyond the pandemic, the scheduling has been more convenient for trainees to find common times to meet and to make adjustments if schedule changes are needed.

Recruitment and selection of Peer Leaders

Typically, students who are selected to be peer leaders are recommended by experienced peer leaders, or peer mentors. The peer mentors are students involved in another student leadership program, who are also participants in the UHD Scholars Academy which focuses on students in STEM majors. These peer mentors usually come from the ranks of the peer leaders, so have been trained through the PLTL training workshop method. Peer leaders also often get their friends involved in the program. These friends are invariably also high-performing students and understand that they have certain expectations placed on them.

Other students interested in becoming peer leaders have participated in a freshman seminar course under Professor Nakamura's guidance. One of the tasks in the freshman seminar course is to document one's study hours every week. This documentation is provided by peer leaders who work in the Collaborative Learning Community Center (CLCC). The CLCC is one of Professor Nakamura's computer labs where peer leaders also serve as tutors when they are not conducting workshops. Not everyone who comes into the computer labs comes for tutoring; they may come for the relaxed study environment. The freshmen come in with their classwork or to study, and when they have questions one of the peer leaders assists them. Freshmen who stand out, either in the eyes of the peer leaders in the CLCC or to Professor Nakamura during the seminar, may be recruited as a potential peer leader. They may or may not end up as a formal peer leader, but going through and completing the training will help them demonstrate their resolve to the peer coordinator, who can also serve as a source of recommendation on behalf of the student to Professor Nakamura. In cases where the freshman makes it through training but may be lacking in some aspect to serve as a peer leader, they can still be considered for other leadership positions.

To be qualified to be trained as a PL, it is important for a student to have been recommended to, or by Professor Nakamura. Additionally, the student must be of good standing academically. If the student is also a Scholars Academy member they would be in good academic standing (GPA of 3.0 or greater). If they are going to lead workshops or be available for tutoring in a specific course, their performance in that course would need to be

a letter grade of a B or higher. In order to be a good peer leader, there is also a focus on their ability to communicate with both their peers and faculty, both listening and understanding.

The selection of the training coordinator

The selection of a new training coordinator is discussed between the current peer coordinator and Professor Nakamura as to who would be the best candidate out of the current group of peer leaders. Typically, the successor has expressed interest before being selected. Since the coordinator's role isn't academic as with the rest of the peer leaders, it is important to make sure that the new coordinator is someone who is a capable communicator and has good judgment (i.e., they can be trusted to make spur-of-the-moment decisions on their own) as they will also be serving as a role model for the peer leaders they will train. The decision on choosing the next coordinator is made before the current coordinator graduates so that the successor is able to spend at least a semester shadowing the current coordinator. Towards the end of that semester's training, the successor runs one or two of the training workshops, and the current coordinator is there to supervise and give feedback. At the end of the semester's training, the coordinator will also amalgamate and pass on the training workshop materials. This includes such items as the agendas for each session, and other notes or figures the coordinator may have incorporated into any of the sessions. Serving as the coordinator has not been limited to a specific number of semesters, but usually the "term" lasts until the coordinator graduates or expresses the need to leave in order to focus on other endeavors.

The training material

Readings and assignments for the training workshops are drawn from selections of *Peer-Led Team Learning: A Handbook for Team Leaders* by Roth, Goldstein & Marcus (2001). Selections from the Handbook are provided to the trainee peer leaders each week. The assignments were generated in the early 2000's by Professor Nakamura and the first peer coordinator. The assignments are simple and short, consisting of several questions that gauge the trainees' understanding of the reading. These assignments are submitted prior to each meeting to the training coordinator to check that each trainee has a good grasp of the reading and has thought about the material. Trainees are expected to bring their reflections and questions on the topic to the meeting. This helps the discussion to start out on a deeper level of understanding than if the topic were to have been introduced to them during the session, to skip the initial superficial level of understanding and to push the discussion.

The training sessions

As mentioned before, each session is intended to take an hour, for a total of eleven hours for eleven sessions. Prior to COVID-19, training sessions would take place in a designated room on campus close to the CLCC that had a PLTL-friendly seating arrangement.

Since the spring of 2020, however, the training sessions have been conducted via Zoom. When the session begins, the coordinator greets everyone and may share some remarks about the assignments or any update before explaining the first discussion or activity. These activities often utilize the breakout room function of Zoom, where the trainees can be split up into groups (the size of which may differ by activity, but usually ranges from 2-5 trainees per group). Before releasing the trainees into the breakout room, the coordinator will let them know how much time they will have to discuss and will send a message out using the Zoom broadcasting feature to let them know when there is a minute left. Oftentimes, the coordinator will enter each breakout room to check how each group's discussion is going, and if they have any questions or feel stuck on something and offer some hints or point them in the right direction. After the time is up, all groups will return to the original Zoom meeting and share what they discussed.

Many activities include the creation of a deliverable, or a product. In some cases, it is specified what each group should do, while others are left open for the group to come to a mutual decision. These deliverables may come in various formats such as concept maps or flowcharts. Using the screen-sharing feature on Zoom, a representative from each group can share the deliverable as well as notes of discussion that the group had in the breakout rooms. The coordinator ensures a flow of conversation between groups as they share their discussions, and after each group has presented, the coordinator summarizes and shares some additional experiences.

Reference

Roth, V., Goldstein, E., & Marcus, G. (2001). *Peer-Led Team Learning: A Handbook for Team Leaders*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.