



Crossing Borders and Barriers: My Journey as an International Peer Leader

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Crossing Borders and Barriers: My Journey as an International Peer Leader

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Abstract

This essay explores my journey from a first-year student struggling with language barriers and becoming a Peer Leader in the Chemistry Department at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Drawing from my experience within the Peer-Led Team Learning Program, I reflect on overcoming my limited English proficiency and embracing the opportunity to lead workshops. By implementing creative strategies, presented here as *20 Ideas for Greater Student Engagement*, I transformed my workshops into collaborative learning spaces, fostering the true values of Peer-Led Team Learning, student engagement, and promoting academic success. I advocate for the expansion of PLTL by emphasizing its potential to benefit other academic disciplines beyond Chemistry, particularly in Engineering. Through this essay, I aim to inspire both students and educators to recognize the value of Peer-Led Team Learning and to appreciate its ability to create inclusive, and supportive environments that encourage student participation and academic achievement.

Keywords: International Student, Language, Strategies, Expansion, Values, Learning, Inclusive, Participation, Achievement, Peer-Led Team Learning

My journey

How does one go from barely speaking English to leading workshops at a major university? I was born and raised in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, where my education was entirely in Spanish. In Mexico, the educational culture is usually lectures and constant notetaking where many professors unintentionally create a sense of intimidation, fostering a learning environment that often discourages student participation and confidence.

My English was self-taught and although I was able to hold conversations in English, interactions made me really anxious, and participating in class discussions was a constant struggle for me. I often doubted my ability to succeed in this unfamiliar environment. Attending the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) was already a big achievement for me, especially since I had never taken an upper-level English class.

It is 5:00 a.m., and I am getting ready for my second day at UTEP, sipping on my usual coffee to survive while I cross the border. I clearly remember that day, and I remember that I had a “workshop” for my chemistry class. Without having an idea of what a workshop was, I walked into the room, having no friends, just the hope that this new environment would offer something different, something more than a lecture. I was really surprised when I noticed a young guy introducing himself as my “Peer Leader.” At the end of this workshop session, I realized I had been introduced to a style of learning that was as refreshing as it was unfamiliar (Gosser and Roth, 1998; Roth, et al., 2001). I was captivated. The environment was incredibly welcoming and supportive, it felt refreshing, new, and powerful, a break from the monotony of traditional lectures. The synergetic atmosphere encouraged teamwork and connection, making it easier to form friendships while approaching challenging chemistry concepts. These workshops quickly became the highlight of my week, a place where I not only deepened my understanding of chemistry but also found a true feeling of belonging. Each session left me eager for the next, as they provided not just academic growth but also the emotional support and team spirit I needed during a challenging transition.

My first semester at UTEP was defined by my chemistry workshops, which allowed me to have a different experience from the typical lectures, exams, or experiences in my other courses. I was facing language barriers at that time and the workshops were a tool where I broke through those barriers. It was no surprise that the workshops became my anchor, offering me a feeling of belonging and a purpose in the PLTL program.

It was not long before I felt inspired to become a Peer Leader myself. I was driven and passionate about contributing to this unique learning experience for others. I wanted to give back by helping students find the same support and encouragement that had been so significant for me. I remembered how good it felt to ask questions without hesitation during workshops, get my doubts cleared up during my Peer Leader’s office hours, and rely on the support and teamwork of my classmates. Being a Peer Leader would be more than just a personal

achievement, it was my opportunity to pay it forward, ensuring that other students could succeed in the same ways I once needed.

I remember the moment when I was offered the opportunity to apply to become a Peer Leader at the end of my first semester. I could not believe it: I, who had struggled so much, was being recognized for qualities I had doubted in myself. Despite this, I embraced the challenge. The chance to lead workshops was more than just an opportunity; it was a validation of my efforts and proof of the supportive environment of the PLTL program.

The interview was my first ever and conducting it in English in front of the experienced Peer Leaders really intimidated me. I was anxious about stumbling over my words, but the interviewers' warmth and encouragement helped me relax and show my true self. I wanted to stand out, I wanted them to focus on me because I knew I had so much to offer. I shared how deeply I believed in the power of peer-led workshops, expressing my determination to help the program grow and reach even more students. It wasn't just an opportunity for me, it was a chance to contribute to something I truly cared about. I was just a first-year student with no prior experience, but I wanted them to see beyond my inexperience to the potential I knew I had. When I received the news that I had been accepted into the program, I was overwhelmed and very happy.

Workshop is a safe space

On the day of leading my first workshop, I was shaking with nerves. I had never led anything like this before, not even in Spanish, so the idea of standing in front of students and sharing my knowledge was terrifying. Despite my fears, I decided to let go and give it my best. I decided to approach the students with kindness, explaining that I was there to help and that they should see me as a friend who had already taken the class and was always available to answer their questions. I emphasized that questions were the fuel of my workshops.

Did they engage immediately? Of course not. They still viewed me as an authority figure rather than a peer. Their seeming lack of interest and interaction frustrated me, and I knew I needed to come up with some ideas to encourage them to talk to me. So, one day, I tried a different approach. I sat with them at the beginning of the workshop, we put aside chemistry for a moment, and I simply talked with them. We laughed, shared stories, and I let them see that I was also a student who understood their struggles. This changed everything; it worked. From that day my workshops became much more friendly and interactive. My students started to ask questions freely, even the "stupid questions" they were too shy to ask the professor.

Understanding that getting my students to open up to me occurred when I realized how incredibly beneficial the PLTL program was in cultivating a supportive and engaging learning environment. Students' ability to clear their doubts made me appreciate the true

value of peer leading. I wanted to stay true to the PLTL program's philosophy, and Dr. Becvar's request "to make them do the work!" always echoed in my mind during my workshops. I found it incredibly challenging to fulfill this request because the students seemed unable to solve simple math problems, to participate, or work as a team. To overcome this new challenge, I came up with different ideas to make my workshops more engaging and interactive, rather than having me as the only one speaking and to be the problem solver (Tien et al., 2002).

One of my favorite ideas was the "Assistant of the Week." Each week, I would let a volunteer student stand with me at the whiteboard and help explain the week's topic, or I would guide "the Assistant" to the right solution while they explained to their classmates. I introduced this idea late in the semester, and not many students were initially brave enough to volunteer, but it eventually proved to be highly effective. I am looking forward to next semester to share this idea in my sessions and rotate the responsibility. Having at least one student who strongly understands the topic creates a connection between them and the workshop. Each student will be a resource for the other students on the topic they explained, fostering an environment where the students feel more comfortable asking questions and seeking help in their own group. For me, this encapsulates the true meaning of a workshop. This initiative not only enhances the students' understanding but will also make them appreciate and engage more with the PLTL program. Below are several of the ways I worked with my students.

20 ideas for greater student engagement: Elevating your workshops

1. *Maximize participation with questions:* To receive full credit on their workshop questions students should be challenged to compose and then ask at least three questions during each session and write them on the back of their worksheets. These questions should also be answered briefly in an easy-to-understand manner by other students. This practice will be beneficial to counter quiet workshops.

2. *Choose an Assistant of the Week (AOTW):* Every week, a student can be chosen to assist the Peer Leader (PL) during workshops to help explain the week's material to the other students. The AOTW will provide examples, definitions, or simple ways for the students to understand the topic. This approach ensures that at least one student understands the topic well and can explain it to their peers outside of the workshop.

3. *Divide your workshop:* Set up two to three stations in the room, each with a big whiteboard. Divide the students into teams and lead the workshop by asking them questions. You, the Peer Leader, do not get to use the whiteboard. Guide them through the correct procedure and answers.

4. *Pop Quiz:* Test your students on past topics with short quizzes to review compounds, ion formulas, bonds, and other important concepts they have previously covered.

5. *Incorporate engaging activities:* Conduct interactive explorations and games that encourage students to discuss answers, concepts, and procedures, allowing them to take the lead in the workshop.

6. *Request Pre-made notes:* Require students to bring pre-worked notes on the material and revise them during the workshop to understand what they have written.

7. *Fill presentations with questions, not with answers:* When working with presentations, avoid PowerPoints filled with answers or concepts. Instead fill the presentation with engaging questions for students to answer, resulting in a workshop flow based on student responses.

8. *Challenge Workshop Students to Write Questions for Professors:* The Peer Leader can challenge workshop students to generate meaningful theoretical questions for their professor to answer during the lecture and then challenge their fellow workshop peers to develop brief, simplified answers.

9. *Dictate instructions:* To get a workshop started, provide instructions and problems and have students solve them independently, then discussing only incorrect answers as a whole group.

10. *Provide a question before leaving:* Before leaving each workshop, students must answer a question and show their work (individually in their notebooks).

11. *Designate a note taker:* Every week, one student will be responsible for taking notes during the lecture and workshop. The notes can then be shared with the workshop through a group chat at the end of the week.

12. *Cry for help post it:* At the start of each workshop, give students a flashcard or a Post-it note where they can write down any question they may have regarding the topics being covered. This will help them better understand the subject matter and potentially identify areas where they need additional support, such as attending office hours.

13. *Choose a Definitions Leader for the day:* On a rotating basis, choose a student to cover the definitions in content modules, or have them explain concepts on the whiteboard and/or create memory aids to better understand topics.

14. *Give rewards for participation:* Offering candy or extra credit for participation or correct answers can be effective in countering undesirable behavior in workshops.

15. *Offer 20-minute review sessions:* Allow the last 20 minutes of the workshop to become a quick review session led by the students. During this time, students can ask questions and those who know the answers can explain them to the group.

16. *Make Question of the Week Videos:* For extra credit, encourage students to participate in creating a Question of the Week Video (QOTWV) to share solutions or answers with their peers.

17. *Change the layout of every workshop:* Keep workshops feeling fresh and new by rearranging chairs, changing where students sit, or having them stand or sit on the floor. It is up to you as the Peer Leader!

18. *Keep doing icebreakers:* Icebreakers are not just for the start of the semester. They are a great activity to continue until every student learns the name of every other student in the workshop. At the beginning of every session, start with icebreakers or small questions to create a comfortable, safe environment for the students throughout the semester.

19. *Show them how you study:* Demonstrate your personal study methods to the students, including how you organize your personal study sessions and how you take notes. Introduce them to effective notetaking strategies, such as the Cornell University's recommended method (<https://lsc.cornell.edu/how-to-study/taking-notes/cornell-note-taking-system/>) and provide them with tips on how to tackle specific topics.

20. *Create a sense of belonging and camaraderie within the workshop:* Divide students into small groups, or "teams," at the beginning of the semester. These teams will work together throughout the term, earning points or extra credit for their group participation, collaboration, and engagement during activities. By fostering friendly competition and team spirit, this approach encourages students to take pride in their group, build stronger connections with their peers, and actively participate in the workshop.

I created these "20 Ideas for Greater Student Engagement" to overcome the silence, shyness, naivete, and disinterest shown by so many students. I hope these suggestions help improve workshops everywhere as much as they have helped me.

Reflections and conclusions

My journey from barely communicating with my peers to confidently conducting workshops has been transformative. The PLTL program has been my comfort place. It has provided a structured, supportive environment where I could practice and improve my English skills. With each workshop, I grew more confident with the language and with my role as a Peer Leader. I was filled with pride and gratitude to be part of it, reinforcing my belief in the power of innovative peer-led Workshops.

As I look back on my journey, I remember how learning as children was always highly interactive, fun, and filled with curiosity. This is something I try to recreate in my workshops because learning does not have to be boring and boring, especially when studying difficult topics. Engaging students with activities that create excitement and collaboration among them not only breaks monotony but also helps to ensure a clear understanding of the material. Learning should always feel like a discovery, just as it did when we were young.

Being part of the PLTL program at UTEP has completely transformed my perspective on education. I cannot express how much I believe in this program and the philosophy of

PLTL. Some schools and professors might be skeptical about this learning system but from my experience, it is one of the best things at UTEP. It is frustrating that not everyone sees the impact that the PLTL program has on students. Both the students and the Peer Leaders love this hands-on, collaborative approach to learning, and most students are incredibly grateful for the support that the Peer Leaders and the PLTL program provide. The impact on students is profound. PLTL builds trust by creating a space where they can ask questions freely without fear of judgment, fosters a sense of community through teamwork and peer connection, and promotes academic success by reinforcing course material in a more interactive and engaging way. For many students, it transforms intimidating subjects into manageable challenges and turns frustration into curiosity. Knowing that UTEP Peer Leaders are making a significant impact on students struggling to learn chemistry is immensely rewarding, as it highlights the real difference this program makes in academic and personal growth.

I have been greatly influenced by various articles I came across in *Advances in Peer-Led Learning* (<https://journal.pltlis.org/>), the online journal of the Peer-Led Team Learning International Society (<https://ptlis.org/>). Especially inspiring was "Inspire" by Gloria Chavez Saenz (2022), the journey told by Paulina Torres (2023), and the guidance on storytelling by Marymoore Patterson (2023). These readings prompted me to think more critically about what PLTL truly means. Another source of readings has been *Peer-Led Team Learning: Handbook for Team Leaders* (Roth et al., 2001), in particular one article, "25 Ways to Get the Most Out of Now" (Ellis, 2001). The suggestions inspired me to brainstorm ideas to enhance workshops by making them more interactive and supportive, and to develop the 20 methods discussed above.

I feel frustrated that I do not have the position or authority to expand the program into my own field of Mechanical Engineering. People underestimate how helpful peer-led workshops can be, but I am determined to advocate for the expansion of the PLTL program into other departments. We do not need to make students' lives harder; we need to foster a sense of community and support to ensure a thorough understanding of the coursework. PLTL is not just another seminar. The Peer Leaders make it special by supporting a completely different, highly beneficial, and innovative approach to learning. This is why I believe so passionately in this program. As I promised in my interview, I am committed to helping the PLTL program grow.

Being a Peer Leader has shaped me in countless ways. My English and my public speaking skills have improved significantly, I can now easily have conversations with people, and I have created study tips for myself that I have shared with students. These experiences are positively shaping me for my career. I am confident that if this program were implemented in the College of Engineering, PLTL would greatly benefit many if not all engineering students

as well. I hope to use the rest of my undergraduate career to do everything possible to expand the program.

Finally, I cannot express enough how much I adore and believe in this program. It is incredibly beneficial for both Peer Leaders and students, and I wish this program would get the attention it deserves so that more people can see how much students love this style of learning. In the end, workshops must spark curiosity, highlight the individual style and enthusiasm of the Peer Leader, and resonate with students, creating a meaningful and lasting impact.

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