Finding Language for the Experience of PLTL

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share a means of communicating why Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) has provided a sense of deep connection among practitioners, including Peer Leaders, faculty and administrators. To arrive at finding the qualitative language of emotions, three discussion sessions were facilitated over the course of three days during the 11th Annual Conference of the Peer-Led Team Learning International Society (June 2023, University of Houston Downtown). Facilitators' techniques, prompts and the necessary pivots used to question assumptions are presented. We found that despite the many variations in the institutions where PLTL is practiced, we are united in acknowledging the benefits and impact on the students and Peer Leaders involved. Our central finding is that acting as a Peer Leader in a PLTL program provides a multitude of benefits that extend beyond academic enrichment. In addition, while the outcomes of this process confirmed previous research findings about the impact of PLTL on Peer Leaders and students, the discussions also highlighted areas that the PLTL community is not currently focusing on and that could be further explored in a systematic way, such as the benefits of PLTL from the perspective of faculty and administrators. The authors encourage practitioners to guide facilitating such a discussion at their individual institutions.

Keywords: PLTL Model, Peer Learning, Facilitation Techniques, Emotional Language, Peer Leaders

Introduction

How do practitioners of Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) describe their shared commitment to this curricular model? The belief in collaboration enables active learning and student empowerment through peer facilitation. This shared belief is common among practitioners. These include the faculty (instructors) who meet with student Peer Leaders to guide the discussion of course content, the staff (learning specialists, program managers and coordinators) who support the pedagogical preparation of the Peer Leaders and administration of the program; the Peer Leaders who facilitate the scheduled sessions with students, and the students themselves. Over the three decades since the inception of PLTL in the mid-1990s, the experience of participating in a PLTL program has often left a lasting impression that is not quantifiable and difficult to define qualitatively. How can a deep feeling be imparted to those without the experience of PLTL?

Attempts to capture the enthusiasm and the sense of connection among practitioners have encouraged "elevator pitches;" an exploration of "champions" (Dreyfuss, 2016); and even informal postings at the 2013 Peer-Led Team Learning International Society (PLTLIS) Conference, asking "What PLTL means to me" (Appendix A). These efforts have aimed to convey the significance of participating in such a campus program. At the 2023 Annual PLTLIS Conference at the University of Houston Downtown (Houston, Texas), the agenda included time for discussions among Peer Leaders and faculty, staff, and administrators. A scheduled hour on each of three consecutive days was used to facilitate conversations to find a common language to describe the experience of PLTL.

Facilitation techniques and approaches

Over the three days of the conference, the facilitators for the sessions (the authors) used a variety of facilitation techniques to encourage participation and discussion, which was primarily in in-person groups, with a small number of conference participants engaged online. The facilitators, a team of PLTL coordinators from multiple institutions, had been selected based on facilitating a pre-conference workshop (Introduction to the PLTL model) at the same 2023 Conference. Flip chart (newsprint) paper and marker pens were provided at each table.

Creating a safe and supportive environment: Facilitators were briefed on using Appreciative Inquiry (Bushe, 2012) as a method to engage participants at arriving at a common understanding that drew from personal experience and could be shared with those not familiar with PLTL, using language that did not devolve to negative experiences. During the small group discussions, the facilitators circulated among the groups to listen for the direction of the conversation.

We began each session with a brief overview of the goals and objectives for that session. Facilitation techniques included:

Small group discussions: Participants were divided into small heterogenous groups, specifically splitting up friends and colleagues, sitting at round tables. This separation of participants from the same campus was deliberate to encourage discussion that was not familiar among group members, fostering more active listening. Through this, participants were exposed to diverse perspectives and ideas. Additionally, the varied group composition encouraged individuals, particularly first-time attendees or new Peer Leaders, to step out of their comfort zones, promoting more equitable participation and the sharing of experiences and insights.

The heterogenous groups were formed by having participants "count off" as follows: A facilitator asks participants to start by stating their sequential number so, the first person says "1", the second person says "2" and so on, depending on the size of the groups to be formed. For example, if groups of 6 are to be formed, and there are 48 participants, the count would go from 1 to 8, and the "9th" person would be assigned "1" to start the counting process again. This "counting off" would continue until everyone was assigned a number. Then, all those with their designated number would form a group: all the "1s" together and so on.

Asking open-ended questions: We avoided asking questions that could be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead, we asked questions that required participants to reflect on their experiences. We wanted to ensure participants were able to relate personally to the questions.

Large group sharing: After the small group discussions, we reconvened the entire group to share the discussion from each table. This process allowed for the hearing of shared successes and challenges and recurring patterns. Additionally, the large group sharing fostered a sense of community, specifically our PLTL community and a collective understanding of the impact PLTL can have.

Reflecting and summarizing: We ended each session by asking participants to reflect on what they had learned and to summarize the key takeaways.

On the first day, participants were divided into separate sessions for Peer Leaders and other participants, with concurrent online sessions. The facilitators were present in the rooms or with the online groups. The in-person groups averaged ten people sitting at a round table, each with a volunteer scribe who had large sheets of paper (newsprint) and markers. For the second and third days' sessions, the participants were not separated: Peer Leaders joined faculty and administrators. The groups in person were randomly assigned again by counting off, so the groups were heterogenous.

Instructions and process of the sessions

Purpose: Finding a common language to share the importance and value of Peer-Led Team Learning

1. Introductions at tables: Name, institution, how long in role (Peer Leader, faculty or instructor, staff, administrator, or other) [10 minutes]
2. [Small group] Discussion at each table (or online participants) was to consider questions [15 minutes]:
3. [Large group] Each group then shared what they wrote [15 minutes]
4. [Open discussion] Then the whole group discussed [20 minutes]

First session prompting questions:
- *What are the benefits of Peer-Led Team Learning?*
- *In your experience, what has been beneficial to you?*

Second session prompting questions:

- *How do you feel about PLTL?*
- *What do you value the most about PLTL?*
- *What are high points for you?*

Third session prompting questions focused on why this exercise was worthy of participants' efforts by projecting the importance of PLTL in the future. The prompts were framed on the basis of *Building for the Next Decade* and asked:
- *What are your important takeaways?*
- *What can support more PLTL practitioners?*

Clarifying instructions

On the first day, in the session without Peer Leaders, the facilitators in the room noticed that discussion was focused on the academic measurements of improved grades and retention of students, the standard focus of curricular interventions. This was not the primary intention of this discussion, so how could the conversations be refocused on exactly *why* practitioners felt PLTL was worth involvement?

The facilitators in the in-person session in overhearing these discussions, convened briefly on how to address these responses, and Cecilia Barone, in a dramatic entreaty, asked the participants to probe their own feelings. As she later explained:

As a former postdoctoral researcher at the Medical Center of my University, I still remember vividly the one question that the chair of the Department would always ask of every speaker at the weekly departmental research seminar, regardless of level of experience and communication skills. Sitting at the front of the room, he would let the speaker go as far as the first couple of introductory bullet points before raising his hand and asking candidly: "Why should we care?" The question inevitably and consistently allowed the speaker to connect to their innermost (and often lofty!) reasons for pursuing their line of research and to communicate this to the audience in front of

them in the most compelling way. When tasked with facilitating the next part of our brainstorming exercise, I knew what question we should ask.

We asked: "Why should we care about PLTL?" "What do we hold on to when we face both global (e.g. pandemic) and local (e.g. lack of institutional support) challenges to engaging in PLTL?" "What does PLTL mean to us, personally?" The responses seem encouraging. When one of our colleagues answered these questions by saying "I care because PLTL can help change the world." we knew that we had reached the level of connection that we were striving for. PLTL might not change the world quite yet, but our brainstorming exercise was helping us reveal our common values as PLTL practitioners.

Visual results

Three "Word Clouds" were created during the third session by Sally Faulkner and Redwan Shahid, based on what they heard during the open discussion. The software used was freely available (https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/generatewordcloud). The words they captured to form the graphics are provided under the images. No formal tabulation was conducted; instead, repetition of heard words provided their weight. The Word Clouds were used as a quick way to visualize discussion highlights and foster additional discussions rather than as an analytical tool.
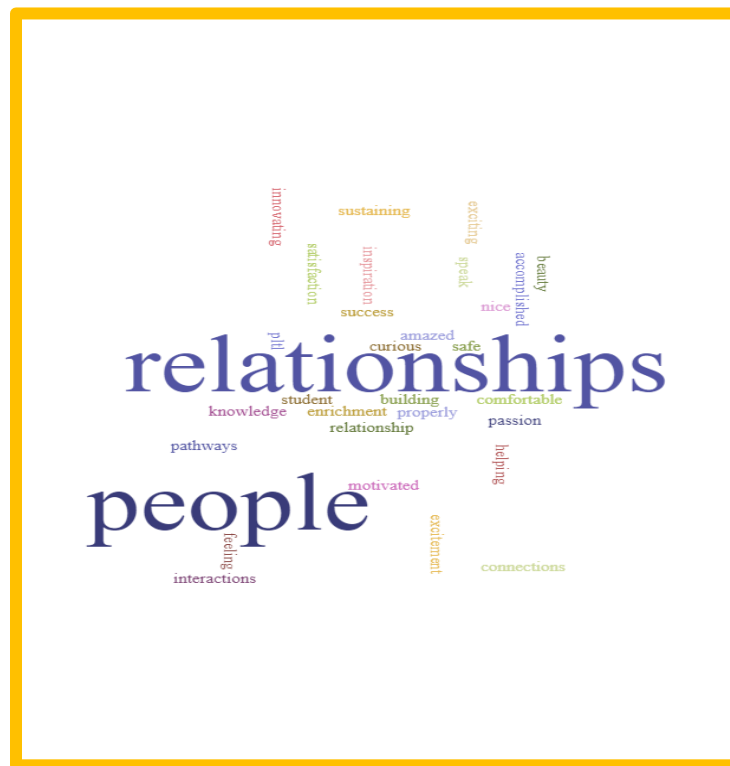

Figure 1. *How do you feel about PLTL?* Results in a Word Cloud

Excitement, amazed, beauty, interactions and relationships, nice feeling helping people, satisfaction with student success, relationships, get to know different people, safe, innovating, comfortable, confidence to speak properly, enrichment of knowledge, accomplished, curious, motivated, better yourself, pathways beyond PLTL, relationship building, inspiration, passion, connections, confidence, self-sustaining

Figure 2. *Describe what you value most about PLTL.* Results in a Word Cloud

Positive feedback,   successful students, rewarding, career development, skills, relationships, community, mentoring, leadership, group dynamics, refine skills, community, learning styles, relationships, rewarding, friendships, inspiration, witness learning, appreciate workshops, inspired, see effort, cohesiveness,   engagement, rewarding to see success, communication with subject manner, efficient communication, community, confidence in subject matter, public speaking, opportunity to see career and different perspectives, transferable skills, breaking barriers, communicating knowledge gaps, communicate what you don't know, networking, relationships and bonds, transferable skills, positive feedback and appreciation, connections and relationships, role model, growth, pride
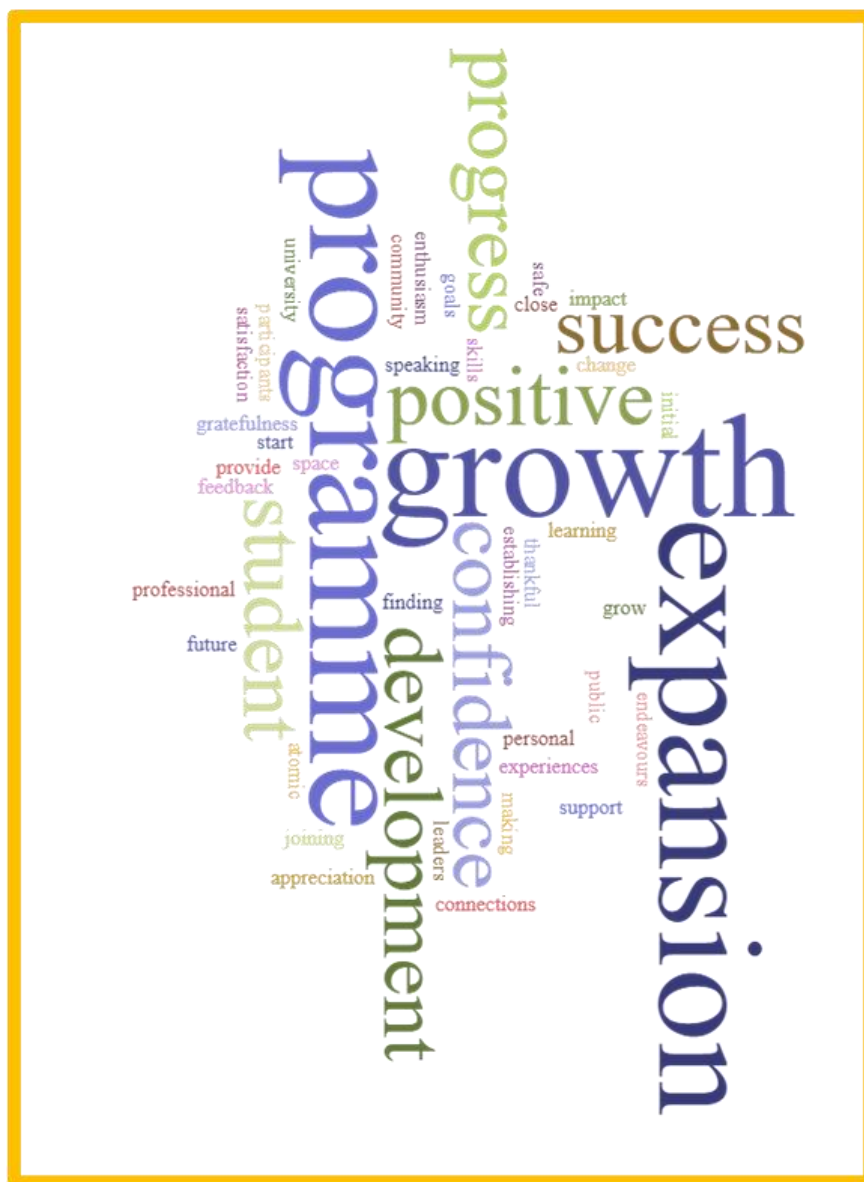

Figure 3. *What has been the high point of the PLTL program so far?* Results in a Word Cloud

Making close connections, finding future endeavours and goals, seeing growth and success, appreciation, see expansion, value to university, students grow and progress, expansion, atomic impact on students, student progress, confidence, learning from students, personal satisfaction, thankful, seeing growth and success, community, change of enthusiasm with program, expansion, positive experiences, initial start-up, establishing program, student growth and becoming leaders, joining program, self-development, safe space, confidence in public speaking, professional skills development, provide support to students, thanks and gratefulness from participants, positive feedback,

Analysis and results

The newsprint sheets were collected and transcribed. The results were then transferred to Excel for thematic analysis. It is noteworthy that the discussions focused primarily on the benefits of PLTL to the Peer Leaders and, secondarily, on the students in PLTL sessions, while the impact on faculty and their teaching effectiveness, as well as the larger impacts on the institutional culture and administration were not explored.

Appendix B presents Table 1, presenting themes of professional skills, confidence, relationships and networking, leadership, opportunities that affect Peer Leaders and to some extent Faculty (instructors); and Table 2, examining benefits to students regarding their understanding and learning as viewed by Peer Leaders and Faculty. Many of the statements repeat ideas that can be found in essays in the PLTLIS journal *Advances in Peer-Led Learning* (https://journal.pltlis.org), and in essays published in the PLTLIS Conference Proceedings (2012-2015; https://pltlis.org/past-conferences/). Perhaps what is remarkable is the consistency of the responses in the themes across time, campuses, and disciplines.

The third session's discussion refocused on *What are key or important "Take-aways"? What can support more PLTL practitioners?* The statements below are drawn from groups' statements written on newsprint and provide an overview of perceived opportunities.

What PLTL is:
1. Widespread; There's always opportunity for growth
2. Flexibility; adaptable program: Different methods in program; although [with] slightly different approaches each program succeeds; diversity in the programs
3. Data supports the success of PLTL; need to collect data (e.g., experiences, everything)
4. PLTL can work for everyone, just takes initiative
5. PLTL works for students: Different methods, same goal
6. Deeper than helping just students
7. Greater benefits for each Peer Leader, not just what it seems

8. Importance of communication between the levels of PLTL (Peer Leaders – staff); passing the baton
9. Collaboration between universities for improvement of programs; building partnerships to grow program
10. "Small contributions lead to big outcomes"

Discussion

Acting as a Peer Leader in a PLTL program provides a multitude of benefits that extend beyond academic enrichment. Specifically, we argue it fosters a holistic development opportunity that encompasses professional skills, networking, relationship building, confidence, understanding, leadership as well as opportunities for personal growth. It is well reported that Peer Leaders develop critical professional and transferable skills such as communication, public speaking, presentation and time management skills (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Chase et al., 2020; Chase et al., 2023; Roth & Tien, 2012). These were recognized and captured as part of our discussions. Furthermore, the act of peer leading equips Peer Leaders with social flexibility and adaptability which are crucial for handling diverse interactions, as well as leadership skills. Networking opportunities are another significant and important benefit. Peer Leaders expand their network, build their community and form friendships with other Peer Leaders, students, as well as instructors, learning specialists, administrators and coordinators, and other staff. The relationships formed benefit both students and Peer Leaders, who create a comfortable learning environment and find happiness and gratification in witnessing students' growth. Overall, the peer leading experience encourages initiative and responsibility on the Peer Leaders' part.

The third day's session emphasized the future significance of PLTL, exploring why participants' efforts were worthwhile and projecting its importance in the coming decade. The prompts, centered on "Building for the Next Decade," asked participants to identify key takeaways and suggest ways to support more PLTL practitioners. Key points included PLTL's widespread applicability and potential for growth, its flexibility and adaptability and the diverse methods that lead to its success. Participants expressed feelings of accomplishment, curiosity, enthusiasm and pride; recognizing that small contributions can lead to significant outcomes. A tag line was suggested by one group: "Do you wanna improve the classes' passing rate? Do you wanna build connections and have fun doing it? Does helping people satisfy you? Switch to peer leading now!" This encapsulates the session's optimistic vision for PLTL's future.

Notably, the focus by the two groups engaged in these discussions – Peer Leaders and faculty (instructors)/staff/administrators – was on the Peer Leaders and students. There was little evident consideration of how the latter group (faculty/staff/administrators) benefited or felt about PLTL, or why they value it. By inference, their sympathies were with the Peer

Leaders, but this does not explain why they themselves become "champions." This is a distinction worth pursuing because students and Peer Leaders are transient members of the academic community, while the other groups form the organization infrastructure. Issues of sustainability and incorporating PLTL as a permanent fixture on a campus are not delineated here and finding *why* deserves further study to find the words underlying a belief that PLTL is a worthwhile form of engagement that supports students, Peer Leaders, and other institutional participants.

Conclusions

The workshop on finding a common language to describe PLTL and its impact was an experiment. Participants were engaged and actively discussed the questions posed to them, and they were able to generate a wealth of ideas and develop a shared understanding of the importance of having a common language.

One of the most memorable comments from the workshop was from a participant who said, "I never realized how difficult it is to describe PLTL in a way that is clear and concise." This comment highlighted the challenges that are faced in this exercise. We think it is very easy to identify and talk about the advantages of PLTL but finding the compelling language to describe it proved more challenging than we expected it to be.

Another critical incident was when participants described their experiences of trying to implement PLTL at their university. The participants said that they had difficulty getting buy-in from faculty colleagues and administrators because they were unable to clearly articulate the benefits of PLTL. This incident highlighted the importance of having a common language to describe PLTL in a way that is clear, concise, and persuasive.

There is also a need to be able to articulate the benefits of PLTL in a way that is relevant to different audiences. While the results of groups' discussions are presented here in summary, there is no clear phrasing or take-away because the felt experiences are complex and worthy of further probing. This might need a redirection to developing cogent and concise story-telling and narratives as suggested by Patterson (2023). The descriptions and opportunities presented here need further examination and may trigger ideas for development of how the PLTL International Society can support and strengthen this innovative, holistic program.

As a result of these contributions from the participants, perhaps faculty, staff, students and Peer Leaders might articulate the benefits as follows:

We champion the Peer-Led Team Learning program because:
- Not only does it support students' learning (more ABC grades, fewer withdrawals, failures, and poor grades; retention in higher-level courses)
- It supports study skills, deeper learning, improved communication

- It demonstrates the power of understanding different ways of learning and different ways of approaching problems, supporting flexibility, critical thinking
- It creates opportunities for friendships, connections, team-building
- It supports leadership development for Peer Leaders, learning to facilitate groups, supporting diverse ways of thinking, adaptability, improved questioning and communication and presentation skills, and a collegial relationship with instructors, staff, and students
- It provides instructors with means of feedback for their teaching, opportunities to work as colleagues with Peer Leaders, and the possibility of posing more challenging materials to encourage discussions in workshop sessions
- It aligns institutional strategic visions with a proven means of supporting change.

We believe that the work that we did in this three-session workshop is an important step towards developing a common language. We encourage everyone to continue to think about this issue, try these prompts with the participants in your campus program, and share the resulting ideas.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A – What PLTL means to me!

At the 2013 PLTLIS Conference, also held at the University of Houston Downtown, Houston, Texas, Thomas Pitzer (Florida International University) posted newsprint with the heading, "What PLTL Means to Me!" The following statements were posted anonymously.

- Becoming a Peer Leader introduced me to my research professor. PLTL molded my leadership skills, which carried over to my classes, research, and workshops. I now possess adequate leadership skills that will serve me well in my pursuit of becoming a chemistry professor.

- Articulation practice

- Being comfortable with being uncomfortable

- Practice makes perfect! – Future High School Math Teacher

- PLTL creates Leaders

- Learning for the sake of learning, not just for the right answer

- PLTL is a passion and inspiration to me every day

- Leading has opened many doors for me, especially socially. It has helped me develop and grow as a person

- PLTL means community, students giving service, forming a bond, friendship, and hopefully success in the course

- Opportunity for students (the Peer Leaders) to create a relationship with faculty

- An opportunity to help students with obstacles that I struggled with when I was in their position

Appendix B – Two tables with themes

Table 1. Themes of professional skills, confidence, relationships & networking, leadership, opportunities

Impact on:	Felt	Value	High Points
Peer Leaders	First employment opportunity	Career development	Having a great work environment
Peer Leaders	Builds confidence: in subject, in general	Helped with confidence; develop confidence	
Peer Leaders	Build friendships and communities	Opportunity: connection to community, the connections	Building a community; Gaining connections who became friends
Peer Leaders	Helped develop communication skills and become friends with students (builds community)	Improved communication skills (especially with English not a first language)	Engagement and communication
Peer Leaders	Seeing students transition from individuals to leaders	Develop leadership skills	Appreciation from the students
Faculty	An enjoyable experience with peers in learning -> Relationships and bonds made with Peer Leaders	Relationship-building; make them feel more comfortable	Building relationship with students and Peer Leaders
Faculty	Love to see growth of Peer Leaders	It promotes leadership skills	Seeing students grow and develop into leaders and better students; the transition from student to Peer Leader; mentoring and embracing leadership
Peer Leaders; Faculty	Flexibility	Willing to try new things; ability to take initiative in other areas; increased sense of responsibility	Learning to ask for help; Satisfaction of serving

Impact on:	Felt	Value	High Points
Faculty; Peer Leaders	Growth within the program/expansion; Opening of pathways beyond PLTL	Growth	Finding future endeavors and goals; seeing the program grow; working together through hardship in starting and building program

Table 2. Themes of understanding and learning

Impact on:	Felt	Value	High Points
Peer Leaders	Communicating knowledge gaps	It helps you understand the subject better	
Peer Leaders	Explain different ways to approach; passion for active learning	Learn the problem-solving process	Facilitating and helping others learn
Peer Leaders	Student feedback; liked to learn new methods/strategies from the students regarding the topic	Communication	Enthusiastic students; the student who failed and is retaking and passed because of PLTL
Peer Leaders	Breaking of barriers; Personal satisfaction from being part of the learning and success of the students	Insights into student learning	When have an especially tough workshop group that ends up "getting it" and know I helped them
Peer Leaders	Like a team	It encourages students to form study groups	Self-sustaining student success
Faculty; Peer Leaders	Satisfaction with/in student success -> combines essential skills with growing relationships	Seeing students succeed	Seeing students succeed and grow
Faculty; Peer Leaders	Transference of skills	Students are learning new study habits and skills from each other	