Peer-assisted learning programs
Implementation in offshore transnational contexts

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Peer-assisted learning: High impact strategy for development and higher achievement

- Supplemental instruction (Dawson et al., 2014) and Peer Tutoring/Mentoring are common types
Benefits of Peer-assisted Learning? (Boud, et. al, 2014; Colvin, 2015)

- Deeper learning of content
- Managing learning and how to learn
- Critical enquiry
- Working with others
- Communication + articulation of knowledge
- Peer and self assessment skills
- Higher grades for participants in many cases
- Reciprocal benefits for peers providing support
RMIT Vietnam context

- Asian Branch Campus of RMIT (since 2000)
  - first International University Campus in Vietnam
- 2016: Ho Chi Minh City & Hanoi (5,000 - 6,000 students)
- Awarding global RMIT University degrees
- Learning Outcomes & Assessment equivalent to, and adapted resources from, RMIT Melbourne
- ‘English Only’ campus
  - the language of instruction and services (EMI)
The only formal PAL program in Vietnam
Our PAL story so far...

2008

Volunteer Peer Mentor program runs, supporting first year courses (mainly Business)

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) introduced

2016

Audit of Peer Mentor program

2017

Launch of revised model for Peer Mentoring + new training program for all PAL supporters
Agenda

• PAL evaluation - 2016
• 3 major ‘tensions’ that emerged
• Issues for consideration in program development
Program evaluation considered...

Assessed...

- Volume of activity and ‘reach’ of support
- Student views of effectiveness and expectations
- Academics views/expectations
- Program administrators’ views (based on observation)
- Peer supporters’ views
## Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Avg visits/Sem</th>
<th>Avg courses supported</th>
<th>Avg staff</th>
<th>User grade advantage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer Assisted Student Sessions</td>
<td>2060</td>
<td>12 (mostly Business ‘core’)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<td>(as high as 18% in some courses)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Mentors</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAS Learning Advisors</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<td>(*measured in courses with more attendance)</td>
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Evaluation: Several issues

- insufficient coverage (supporter mapped to only one course left most courses uncovered)
- higher student evaluations of professionalized service (PASS higher rated than Peer Mentors)
- much higher student attendance PASS (professionalized) vs. Mentors (volunteers) - semester avg. 2060 visits vs. 325
- academic integrity and course alignment concerns from academics
Cultural expectations about learning and teaching
Beliefs shape the role/performance

- “I need to show them that I know the answer to all their questions.” (Peer Mentor)
- “They need me to show them what to focus on to pass the exam. Other things they can just skip.” (Peer Mentor)
- “Students come to me because I can explain it better than the lecturer.” (Peer Mentor)
- “Mentors need to give me the answers.” (Student)
- “That’s not the way we’ve shown the students in class. The mentors are not in step.” (Lecturer)
Problematic support practices

- Re-teaching content (based on memory of previous class)
- More telling than questioning (‘mentor-centered’)
- Very little engagement with learning strategies
Which one likely reflects the institutional learning experiences of most Vietnamese students?
Notes on Vietnamese educational culture
(Nguyen, Terlouw, Pilot, 2006; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005)

• A Confucian Heritage Cultural context (CHC)

• High ‘power distance’ between Teacher and Learner
  o Vietnam: “King-Teacher-Father” ranking
  o Knowledge passes on “one-way street” (T→ L)

• In group work:
  o Strong hierarchy tendency: Groups need a leader (vs. shared leadership)
  o Group harmony and face important: Confrontation and questioning -- a potential threat to the group
PAL pedagogy: Potential clash?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1995)</th>
<th>Situated learning (Lave &amp; Wenger, 1991; Brown et al., 1989)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Knowledge ‘constructed’ through social activity (CL, SL)</td>
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<td>● Social problem-solving around common task/activity (CL)</td>
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<td>● Group imposes structure on task (CL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Emphasis on <em>interdependence</em> of participants and <em>shared responsibility</em> (CL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Critique of traditional hierarchy <em>based on ownership of knowledge</em> (CL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Authentic: Reflects real need for people to work together to solve problems (CL, SL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Inherently dialogic - focus on quality of communication between parties (CL, SL)</td>
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Program improvement responses

- Need to develop strong supporter skills and identity as **collaborators** -- not ‘mini-lecturers’
- Requires **intensive training program** with ongoing observation and PD opportunities needed (e.g. tutoring and academic integrity concerns)
- Closer **connections** with academic staff in courses with heavy support needs
Issue 2

Workforce and staffing model
Issues identified

• **Coverage model**
  
  o “Why can’t you have a mentor for my course this semester?” (1 course <-> 1 mentor model)

• **Recruitment model**
  
  o **Quality**: Success in one course ≠ Model student
  
  o **Reliability**: Casual commitment
  
  o **Fairness**: “It’s like a job, but no pay.”; “Why do other student workers get pay, but not us? Our work is more challenging.”
Our student staff profile

• undergraduate students only

• limited life & work experience
  
  o Most work experience happens in family context in Vietnam
Program improvement responses

● Institute pay model
● One student → multiple courses
● Recruitment of only high achievers with longer experience in program + intensive application process
● Intensive training on professional work practices
Language use in PAL
RMIT Vietnam is ‘English Only’: studies & services

• English as Medium of Instruction (EMI)

• PAL supporters are required to use English as the primary language of instruction (represent the university)

But...
“When we talk to them in Vietnamese and then switch into English, they look at us like we are arrogant, showing off or something like that. Personally, I use English more in high school than in this university and I don't know why.”

--survey response from PAL supporter
The positive: Knowledge and skills development

• “Because we learn the course in English, it's easier for us to run it [the support] in English. I find it easier to explain something to students in English and it's hard to find a word in Vietnamese.”

• “Because they learn English and they are tested in English, so it is not just about the knowledge but it's also about improving the language skills while they are studying here, not other universities.”
Issues with English: L1 facilitates learning

- “In some common knowledge, we may use English, but for the complex course contents, Vietnamese would help Vietnamese students better understand the course”

- “..most of my students come... because they don’t understand what the teachers said in their classes’

- “some students actually know the answers but they don't know how to explain it in English.”
Issues with English: Anxiety and social distance

• “...sometimes students feel anxious if I use English.”

• “When we use English, it's less social.”

• “sometime when i start with English in the quick chat, and when i ask them in English they just stare at me like I am some kind of alien, then after 5 minutes I waited, I changed back into Vietnamese”
## Tension points over language use in PAL

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<th>Tension area</th>
<th>Competing interests</th>
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<td>PAL program goals</td>
<td>Disciplinary learning</td>
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<td>Developing transferable skills (e.g. English)</td>
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<td>University strategy (Differentiation)</td>
<td>Unique linguistic environment (in VN)</td>
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<td>Language rights of students</td>
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<td>Roles</td>
<td>PAL as university representative</td>
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<td>PAL as skilled peer (in line with CL framework)</td>
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<td>Student readiness</td>
<td>Expectation of student English skills</td>
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<td>Reality -- Some students unready for 100% English study</td>
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Program improvement responses

- **Recruitment:** Make English use a part of job description and hiring consideration
- **Policy:** Use English as much as possible -- Vietnamese for clarification when necessary
- **Messaging:** Emphasize the value of English use in program communication
References


