

Establishing a successful PASS programme: Learning from our collective experience

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Abstract

The paper outlines the key phases in the development of PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) at Lincoln University and identifies those aspects we have come to value as essential to the success of the programme. The paper seeks to investigate areas of interest or concern to PASS developers as a contribution to the discussion on methods of implementation and ways to achieve best practice in PASS programmes. Ideas from the ATLAANZ 2013 conference workshop on this topic have been incorporated into the paper.

Development of PASS at Lincoln University

Background

As a small university comprising three faculties, a total student body of approximately 3,000 students, with 600 first-year bachelor's degree students (2013 figures) and a higher than average international:domestic student ratio, Lincoln faces particular challenges. In July 2011, a proposal to implement peer learning identified four challenges that could be addressed by a PASS programme. These were: meeting the needs of a growing and increasingly diverse student body; financial constraints requiring efficiency in meeting these needs; government policy emphasizing the retention and success of Maori and Pacific students, whose numbers are increasing through targeted recruiting projects; and meeting the learning needs of the growing number of international students.

PASS is based on the University of Missouri Supplemental Instruction (SI) programme developed in 1973 by Dr Deanna Martin in response to the needs of African American students. A number of learning theories underpin the SI approach to learning, key among these being Vygotsky's view that learning is primarily a social process, constructed through social interaction in a cultural context, and only secondarily an individual process (Palincsar, 1998). Since 1973, SI has spread to over 35 countries around the world and is known by various names, such as PASS and PAL (Peer Assisted Learning). SI has been widely researched and has been shown to have a positive effect on learning, and on retention and degree completion (Fayowski &

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MacMillan, 2008; Malm, Brynfors, & Mörner, 2011; McCarthy, Smuts, & Cosser, 1997; Ning & Downing, 2010).

PASS programmes may be set up in a Student Learning Centre or in faculties. A coordinator oversees the running of the programme, usually with administrative assistance. Some programmes are funded from central funding, some from faculties, or partially funded from these two sources, and a few programmes are funded by outside interest groups (such as course-related industries).

In a PASS programme, weekly sessions of group study are facilitated by second or third year students (near peers) who are selected from top graduates in the paper they are supporting, and have shown in interviews that they have leadership ability. The facilitators (or PASS Leaders) do not re-teach material, but create learning activities which require the session participants to collaborate to complete the tasks. The sessions provide an opportunity for students to engage with peers, ask questions in a non-threatening environment, have fun and learn study skills as well as course content. PASS facilitators are trained in group facilitation skills and are able to further develop their leadership skills through ongoing training and reflective practice. As the programme develops, experienced facilitators may be employed as mentors to assist in the training and development of new facilitators. The PASS leadership experience has been shown to contribute to the development of graduate attributes (Scott & McLean, 2013; Skalicky & Caney, 2010) and skills transferable to employment situations (McPhail, Despotovic, & Fisher, 2012).

At Lincoln, the proposal to establish a PASS programme presented four particular aspects of PASS, and linked these aspects to research from New Zealand and overseas. First, the benefits of PASS included: a significant increase in grades and a decrease in failure rates (Parkinson, 2009); a more in-depth understanding of the fundamental concepts in the course (Power, 2010); development of student skills appropriate to the discipline (Martin & Arendale, 1994, as cited in Skalicky & Caney, 2010); leadership skills development for PASS leaders and mentors (Couchman, 2009; Skalicky & Caney, 2010); and an increase in motivation and a decrease in social isolation as students engage in collaborative learning (Topping, 1996). The second aspect was the feasibility of implementing the programme in a small university (Treston, 1999). Third, evidence was given of the effectiveness of PASS with indigenous and minority groups (Gillory, 2009; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007; see also van der Meer & Scott, 2013). The fourth aspect concerned implementing peer learning to shift the focus of Learning Centre work from tutor-student to student-student. Such a move has elsewhere been shown to be educationally sound and cost-effective (van der Meer & Scott, 2008). Thus, PASS was promoted as a way to increase student success in first year courses, improve retention and improve outcomes for Maori, Pacific and international students.

Support for a PASS programme was obtained from the Library, Teaching and Learning (LTL) Group of the university, Te Manutaki (Office of Maori and Pacific

Development), and the Associate Vice-Chancellor (Academic) whose role included responsibility for student retention. The programme was conducted from LTL, where study rooms could be booked for the sessions. Although established as a partnership between LTL and Te Manutaki, coordination was managed from LTL alone from mid-semester one when the Maori Student Support Coordinator left Te Manutaki.

2012 trial programme

In 2012, PASS was trialed in three courses (papers), one in each of the three faculties², in each semester, with two or three peer leaders per course. Peer leaders/session facilitators were trained using the University of Wollongong (UOW) training materials (Australian National Centre for PASS, 2011) and sessions were offered in weeks 2-12 of the semester and in study week. The UOW model of PASS administration provides for leader support through meetings with the leaders to give feedback on their session plans, and through observation of the leaders in their sessions. Three team meetings were held during the semester for on-going training of the leaders. Lecturers in each of the courses concerned provided further support for the peer leaders.

In semester 1, uptake of PASS by students varied across the courses and through the semester. In this semester, 124 sessions were run with a total of 108 students participating. An analysis of student marks showed that the average mark for PASS attendees was higher than that for non-attendees, which indicates that PASS attendance had some positive effect on marks. However, owing to the many other factors that influence student success, and the small scale of this trial project, this attendance:marks relationship cannot be stated with certainty.

A questionnaire administered to PASS participants in the penultimate week of the semester generated 21 responses. These students positively evaluated their PASS experience, commenting on the value of small group discussions and the ease of asking questions in the PASS environment. Other gains identified by the students were: understanding course content (21 students); forming friendships (17); increased motivation to complete the course (16); and development of learning skills (16). In presenting these results to university management, reference was made to van der Meer and Scott's (2009) strong support for a broader perspective when evaluating the PASS programme. In their view it is important that students "perceive the development of study skills [in the PASS programme] to be helpful and effective" and that students should feel PASS helps them to "make connections with other students" (p. 5).

The programme attracted few Maori, Pacific or international students, though the few who attended a number of sessions were mostly positive in their responses to the questionnaire. Lack of promotion to these groups in particular may have been one factor in low up-take, but also further training of leaders, particularly in making EAL (English as an alternative language) speakers feel comfortable in the sessions

² i.e., Faculties of Agriculture & Life Sciences; Commerce; and Environment, Society & Design

was signaled. Through attention to this factor, sustained attendance of international students increased in semester 2.

The programme operated within its allocated budget of approximately \$7,000 for the semester, excluding coordination costs. Although attendance in the programme did not meet expectations, particularly in semester 2, semester 1 results were sufficient to persuade funders to continue to support the programme, but with the proviso that key performance indicators (KPIs) be set for 2013, and the overall goal be to achieve a more cost-effective use of funds. The KPIs were generated with reference to the Australian Centre for PASS Guidelines for Best Practice, 2010 (Australian National Centre for PASS, 2011).

2013 achieving sustainability

Sustainability was perceived as a use of funds that was justifiable on the basis of the gains in student learning, as measured by the numbers of students benefitting, grade outcomes and student satisfaction. Achieving sustainability may be closely linked to creating a culture of peer learning at the university, so that collaborative group learning becomes a normal way to study. Therefore, to make peer learning better known across the university and to enable a wider range of students to experience PASS, the programme was offered in six courses in semester 1, 2013 and in four courses in semester 2. The faculties provided funds for peer leader wages and LTL provided the administration and coordination.

The training programme was substantially revised, following peer leader feedback from 2012. Lipsky's (2011) *A Training Guide for College Tutors and Peer Educators* provided worksheets that trainee leaders found accessible and engaging. Training was continued in team meetings held initially weekly, then fortnightly. The meetings focused on particular aspects of the facilitation role and collaborative learning. Reflective practice was ensured by requiring the leaders to reflect on their PASS sessions and post this reflection to the PASS team forum (adapted from Victoria University practice, D. Laurs, personal communication, December, 2012). Coordinators responded to the posts, giving encouragement and suggestions. Leaders received feedback on their sessions through formal observations by coordinators and informal observations by peers. They also took responsibility for promoting their sessions on course web pages and in lectures, with additional promotion if session attendance was lower than eight students.

Our reflection on the 2013 experience was that both the initial and the ongoing training were successful in developing leaders' facilitation skills and encouraging deeper thinking about their sessions. However, having only one facilitator per course was not a successful strategy, as three leaders were affected by illness or accident during the second semester, and this led to a lack of continuity in offering sessions, and a consequent fall-off in attendance in three of the four courses supported by PASS. The one course which did have continuity showed excellent results in terms

of higher average marks for the regular (5+ sessions) attendees, compared with those who had not attended any PASS sessions.

The “must haves”

Over the course of these two years, we have learnt that several factors are indispensable to running an effective PASS programme. The first is facilitator training, which we do as two days pre-semester and further training meetings during the semester. For 2014, the ongoing training meetings will be reduced to three per semester (a cost-cutting measure), but weekly oversight of session plans will be done by the coordinators, in the form of discussion during planning time. Session reflection and response via the PASS forum will continue. Online activities for peer leaders to engage in will also continue. An example task was, “Choose one of six provided peer reviewed articles on PASS, and prepare to discuss at the next training meeting how ideas in the article relate to your practice as a peer leader.”

During the pre-semester training, facilitators meet with their course lecturers to clarify roles, identify mutual benefits from PASS and make arrangements for regular meetings or other forms of communication with respect to the course and the PASS sessions. The need for clear and regular communication became evident during the semester, and reflects the importance of building relationships across the university in relation to PASS (Unite, 2013).

We discovered that while facilitator promotion of their sessions to students via lecture visits, slides and posting on the course web page was effective, it was not sufficient to keep the PASS message in front of students. Coordinators needed to use all avenues of university-wide publication to further promote the sessions. Promotion by lecturers has been very effective.

The bigger picture

Three key areas have become apparent in the PASS journey. Firstly, it is essential to develop avenues of communication and a relationship of mutual assistance among the wider PASS team, which, for us, is those immediately involved in running the programme: the peer leaders, coordinators and administrators; the lecturers and tutors of the supported courses; and our immediate managers. Secondly, collegial support is imperative. Within the university, communicating with colleagues about PASS at the various levels promotes understanding of PASS and generates support for the programme. Inter-institutional sharing of ideas has greatly helped us in developing our programme, and in turn, we have been able to support others. Lastly, improvement comes through perseverance and continual reflection. Padró and Kimmins (2013) support a shift in emphasis from the demonstration of outcomes to monitoring ongoing performance and continuous improvement.

Ideas for development

Areas we would like to focus on in 2014 are, firstly, the development of a peer leader professional pathway. To this end, in February peer leaders will join the University of Otago leaders for one day of the 2-day training programme and will receive on-going mentoring from Otago mentors (senior PASS leaders). Highlighting the contribution PASS leadership makes to the graduate profile is a key element of developing the professional pathway, and may become a strong selling point with PASS funders in the university (Scott & McLean, 2013). Secondly, targeted programmes for particular groups of students will be developed. To actively encourage Pacific students to attend PASS, sessions facilitated by a Pacific student will be run and promoted to this group, though open to other students as well. A third theme is to build stronger relationships with faculty staff, which will be actioned through informal visits and team meetings and reports emphasizing effective educational practices in PASS. Fourthly, marketing goals and strategies need to be strengthened. The peer leaders have taken action on this front by posting a link on the course web page to a Facebook page open to the students in that course, with the aim of facilitating PASS-related discussion between the participants outside of the session. Lastly, university management has asked the PASS team to benchmark the programme against other PASS programmes in the region, so this exercise will also be undertaken in 2014.

ATLAANZ workshop discussion

The Conference workshop participants were invited to discuss PASS coordination questions under various headings, and to add their own questions, ideas and concerns (see Appendix for the questions discussed). Within the 50-minute workshop, participants were given 25 minutes for group discussion, and chose the following topics: course selection, peer leaders and other support options. The workshop discussion is briefly summarized below.

Course selection:

- Criteria used for course selection include: at risk courses, international courses which had course coordinator buy-in, student demand, and high-use courses with open entry.
- The tutor/lecturer of a PASS-supported course is asked to give the following support: recommend candidates for leader selection, provide course materials to leaders, assist with promotion of PASS and give feedback on the PASS programme to coordinators.
- The course teaching staff should see the role of the leader as complementary to their own, as an assistant, and as a potential post-graduate.

Other support options:

- Options provided for students in courses where PASS is not available include one-to-one peer tutoring, Maori and Pacific mentors, and support from Learning Advisors.
- Other learning programmes offered are: peer writers (paid post-graduates who assist undergraduates to develop writing skills), a student hub, and learning/academic skills workshops.

Peer leaders:

- Participants thought that students chose to be peer leaders through a desire to help others and for the income they received. What they received in return was leadership skills and an addition to their resume.
- In selecting peer leaders, PASS coordinators looked for the following qualities: high achievers, confident in the subject, and possessing excellent people skills and empathy.
- The key elements that participants thought should be focused on in training were: understanding student learning, questioning techniques (not giving answers), engaging the students, acceptance without judgment, creating a friendly relaxed atmosphere, and appreciation of privacy and ethics.

2014 update

During semester 1, 2014, a review/benchmarking exercise conducted by our colleagues, Carole Scott and Angela McLean, from the University of Otago, highlighted a number of issues for the development of PASS at Lincoln. A point of significance to other PASS developers will be the recognition that starting small, with one or a very few papers and providing multiple session times, is a more effective strategy to encourage a peer learning culture than aiming for spread across multiple papers. It is also important to aim for continuity in a paper.

In their reflection on the programme, the PASS leaders emphasised the importance of regular PASS team meetings to establish a spirit of cooperation and support for one another.

With this in mind, and the realisation that more ongoing training was needed in semester 1, team meetings for training and collaboration will be held more regularly in semester 2.

Creating space for PASS sessions in very full timetables has been challenging, but could be achieved by working with faculties when timetables are set. The reviewers found that we have not yet achieved a high level of PASS awareness at all levels of the university and need to work through professional networks within the university to improve staff knowledge of the programme. Regarding coordination and administration of the programme, two half-time positions (about twice the current

staffing) were recommended to further develop the programme from its present size of four papers and eight peer leaders. We have been able to address some of these points in semester 2, while others will need a longer time frame.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the progress of a small university in setting up a peer learning programme, and the lessons learnt so far. It is hoped that many of these lessons will resonate with coordinators or intending coordinators in other institutions and be of some use to them. PASS at Lincoln has not yet become a permanent aspect of our services to students, nor can collaborative learning be said to be a normal feature of study at Lincoln. However, the programme has been shown to lead to better outcomes for students; PASS participants and leaders report a positive learning experience, and academic staff involved with the programme are keen to continue with it. Through inter-institutional sharing of our experience in peer learning and our ideas on best practice, we can all contribute to establishing effective collaborative learning programmes in our institutions and thus improve the student learning experience.

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Appendix

List of questions discussed in the workshop

Course selection:

1. What criteria do you use for selecting which courses PASS should support?
2. What do you require from tutors/lecturers in order to have PASS support their course?
3. What relationship do you aim to establish between PASS and the course teaching staff?

Other support options:

1. What do you do for students in courses not catered for by PASS?
2. What other peer learning programmes do you offer and what are their aims?

Peer leaders:

1. Why do people choose to be peer leaders and what do they get out of it?
2. What qualities do you look for in selecting peer leaders?
3. What key elements should be focused on in training?