Peer Teaching

Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center

“How To” Pedagogies # 8

WHY IS PEER TEACHING RELEVANT?

Social Factors: Newcomb (1973) notes, “the most important source of influence for a student...is the reference group” (p. 73). Peers have considerable influence on one another, and certainly more influence than an instructor. Peer teaching can develop and strengthen a positive influence among students.

Pedagogical Factors: While lecture attendance is one of the most passive forms of learning, participation and dialogue among students constitutes one of the most active forms of learning. Furthermore, peer teaching can lesson students competitiveness in the classroom, thus increasing cooperation and participation.

Economic Factors: Simply put, having students step up and assume faculty responsibilities is a major economic incentive. Allowing time for individualized attention in the classroom, particularly when a high student-faculty ratio exists, can cut down on the time the instructor will spend outside of class assisting students.

Another factor to consider when creating a peer-teaching environment is that of the student that will be doing the teaching. Levels of student responsibility can vary considerably, ranging from a think-pair-share situation to actually teaching another student new content. Peer teachers may also serve as tutors, check the work of other students, or serve as a mentor to other students in the class or program.

WHAT IS PEER TEACHING?

Although the name sounds straightforward, peer teaching is a complex process by which students learn from students that are more experienced and knowledgeable about the subject material.

Benefits of Peer Teaching for Learners:
- Many students feel more comfortable asking questions to other students, rather than their professor
- Reduced frustration on difficult assignments
- More time for individualized attention

Benefits of Peer Teaching for Teachers:
- Teaching others ensures a high level of content mastery
- Sense of accomplishment (and in some cases, funding)
- Peer instructors gain valuable teaching experience

Vasay (2010) conducted a study of peer teaching in college mathematics, and found that it “greatly affects the intellectual and moral values of the students, such as the ability to express their ideas, mastery of different concepts, time management, sense of responsibility, sharing, self discipline, self reliance, self confidence, resourcefulness, cooperation [and] obedience.”

NEED HELP GETTING STARTED?

CCNY has developed a Center for Peer-Led Team Learning, and the site has videos, presentations, tips, and other resources for anyone interested in PLTL. Take advantage of these great tools here: http://www.pltl.org/

Washing University has developed a burgeoning peer teaching program for several large undergraduate courses. Learn more about this successful program here: http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/pltl

The University of South Carolina’s Honors College has created a peer instruction program that allows undergraduates to teach in several disciplines. Read about the experiences of some of SCHC’s student teachers here: http://schc.sc.edu/UserFiles/schc/Documents/AHA!/Peer%20Teaching%20AHA%20article%20Fall09.pdf

The “How To” pedagogy series are quick reference pages that define and describe active learning methods to increase student engagement. Each handout provides basic information and references to get you started.
MODELS OF PEER TEACHING

Peer teaching can be used in many ways to engage students. Below, are six models that can be implemented in a variety of class sizes and subjects.

Discussion Groups – teaching assistants lead seminar-style sessions for other students. This model is most beneficial in very large classes, as it provides a link between the many students in the class and the professor. Graduate teaching assistants are typically used in this case.

The Proctor Model – undergraduate students serve as a liaison between the professor and other students (by communicating progress and problems in understanding material), as well as an experienced guide to the students with whom they are working.

Student Learning Groups – students work in self-guided groups in order to foster peer learning. Students in learning groups have been found not only assist those at different levels of ability, but also to hold peers accountable for readings and other assignments.

Media-Activated Learning Groups – Very similar to traditional student learning groups, MALGs place students into groups, but work through the learning process with materials provided by the instructor, including audio-visual aids, presentations, and other media tools to provide structure to the process.

Student Counseling Model – Here, peers serve first as a counselor or sponsor to incoming freshmen; they help with orienting the student to campus life and helping with day-to-day issues. Later, the student-counselors assist the younger students with curriculum, tips on note-taking, lab work, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When considering the selection of undergraduate teaching assistants, there are certain characteristics that may help the instructor select the best peer teachers. It is recommended that students should have: already earned an “A” in the course, have a minimum overall GPA in his/her studies (many schools require a 3.0 or higher), be available a set number of hours per week.

In order to gauge the success of a peer teaching program, collecting feedback (during and upon competition) can be extremely useful. Consider asking students: if the peer instructor (PI) helped the student gain a better understanding of course material, or if the student would recommend a PI-taught course to other students.

Instructors should be aware of student abilities and be deliberate in their plans to use peer teaching: that is, the instructor should decide beforehand if students will have an "unequal" peer (a student teacher with a higher level of comprehension) or “equal” peer (the partnering of students at the same level so they teach/learn together).

REFERENCES


Contact the Tenn TLC for more information by calling 974-3807 or by email tenntlc@utk.edu. Visit our site http://tenntlc.utk.edu and follow our blog http://tenntlc.blogspot.com for publications and faculty development information! K. Brinkley 2011