

Editorial

This is the second part of a Special Edition of the JLDHE focussing on academic peer learning. This issue includes a further ten articles (five papers and five case studies) exploring a wide range of features associated with peer learning in higher education, including issues of culture, communication, community and employability, as well as academic learning. This collection offers insights into subject-specific as well as more general approaches, and covers varying contexts, including online environments.

In a subject-specific study, Jill Barber and Sadaf Ilias describe their use of peer assisted learning to raise students' awareness of the problem of antibiotic resistance. Illustrating the efficiency and effectiveness of the approach, they describe how peer assisted learning successfully cascaded knowledge from a single fourth year student to 21 second year students, and then to over 700 students from various disciplines and year groups.

Sigrun Wagner explains how peer feedback was implemented to facilitate a shift from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning. This shift has been very successful with demonstrable improvements reported in engagement and performance.

Claire Cornock's paper reports on the value undergraduate students place on a well-established Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme in Mathematics. The PAL programme matches small groups of first year students with final year students, with the aim of easing transition in the early stages of degree level study through supporting the development of a Maths learning community and through enabling transfer of academic skills. While the findings of the study are mixed, clear benefits of the scheme include the prevalence of sustainable peer learning groups, and the high value the third year PAL leaders place on the guidance of academic staff.

The notion of learning community also features in Lucy Chilvers' paper, which evaluates the contribution of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) to supporting international students in making the adjustment to learning within Higher Education (HE). The paper draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) social-learning model, Communities of Practice (CoP)

and explores the data through the themes of community, practice and participation. It explores the extent to which PASS can contribute to support international students in, for example, adjusting to cultural norms, learning academic-specific and discipline-specific languages and practices; and motivating participation and independent study.

The idea of 'learner communities of practice' also underpins the Student Academic Mentoring project that is the subject of an interpretivist qualitative case study by Gillian Pye, Susan Williams and Linda Dunne. Second year undergraduate students on an education programme acted as mentors to first years on the same programme. A 'tripartite structure' was used with individual, small group and in-class mentoring. The authors report notable benefits in terms of student engagement, belonging and developing a community of practice.

Jannike Hille, Gundula Hiller and Stefanie Vogler-Lipp explore the positive impact that the peer tutor training delivered at the European University of Viadrina has had on peer tutors' intercultural learning progress. By encouraging peer tutors to reflect on their own and others' teaching and learning practices, the study has found that the specialised training offered by Viadrina Peer Tutoring has been highly successful in developing a range of intercultural competencies, including empathy and respect for otherness and communicative awareness.

Eleanor Quince and Charlotte Medland also address the role of peer mentoring in supporting the transition to Higher Education. Their case study explains the development and initial evaluation of a student-led pilot rolled out across an entire Humanities faculty. The use of social media, particularly Facebook, was central to the success of this project. As the authors note, *'Harnessing familiar social media networks to link new and current students gives both parties the confidence to interact with their peers, and gave mentees an additional support option outside of their face-to-face meetings'* (p. 12).

The importance of such competence and developing community is particularly relevant and presents particular challenges in online environments. Sharon Boyd and Jessie Paterson present an evaluation of their online, distance-learning, postgraduate peer tutor project which has two core aims: first, to develop student academic skills in group facilitation and learning support; second, to enhance support for their increasing numbers of online, distance-learning students. Feedback from staff, peer tutors and the students

involved suggested that fostered a real sense of community for all the different sets of participants.

The qualitative findings from Jill Andreanoff's mixed method study support the premise that undergraduate students perceive peer coaching as improving their academic performance, confidence and motivation. This was also tested quantitatively pre- and post-coaching using the Sander and Sanders (2009) Academic Behaviour Confidence Scale. These data suggested significant increases in academic confidence which, in turn, can positively affect academic performance. Her study supports the use of peer coaching in universities – particularly at first year level – as a means of improving student success and retention, through increased confidence, motivation and practical and emotional support.

In their piece 'The benefits of peer mentoring', Melanie Giles, Amanda Zacharopoulou and Joan Condell explore the application of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) in a UK higher education context. PASS is a long running and internationally renowned form of peer learning which is well-established in America and Australia. It involves trained higher year students (PASS leaders) working in pairs to facilitate regular study groups with students in the year below. Both sets of participants benefit from the experience which enhances learning development for the recipients and employability skills for the developers.

We hope that readers will enjoy this second part of our special edition on academic peer learning as much as the first. Once again we wish to thank Marcia Ody and Melanie Giles who acted as guest editors, and all the authors of these papers.

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