



An investigation into attendance at, experience of, and views towards Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) in level 1 psychology students

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What is PAL?

- Peer Assisted Learning – peer tutoring scheme
- Supplemental Instruction from USA (Martin et al., 1983)



Why might PAL be useful?

- Research evidence suggests that there are numerous benefits to students of attendance at PAL:
 - *Student-centred*, facilitating deep learning (Falchikov, 2001)
 - Increases the understanding of the subject matter and improves study skills (Capstick et al., 2004)
 - Improved critical reading skills (Finlay and Faulkner, 2005, Longfellow et al., 2008)
 - Can assist development of numerical skills (Tariq, 2005)
 - Improved course grades (Parkinson, 2004)
 - Improved retention (Congos & Schoeps, 1998)
 - Development of social/interpersonal skills (Topping & Ehly, 2001)
- Additional help to students (Tariq, 2005), cost effective (Levine et al., 1987)



Attendance at PAL

- However, in the School of Psychology, the number of students who actually attend is very low (see also Hammond et al., 2010; McDonald, 2012)
- Normally, “busy” sessions receive 5-6 clients per week, some sessions receive none
- Prior to coursework deadlines ~ 16 attendees



The evaluation aim (1)

- Why, despite all these potential benefits, do students not attend?
 - Unaware of any benefits?
 - A fundamental distrust?
- What (if anything) can be done to encourage more students to attend?
- When students have attended, are they finding that the sessions are in any way helpful to them?
- Good to evaluate on a regular basis anyway (Topping & Ehly, 2001)



The evaluation aim (2)

- We decided to sample level 1 PAL attendance:
 - Most in need of academic help, at this time of academic transition?
 - Most need of social/pastoral support, at this time of life transition?
 - Momentum . . .

University of Glasgow **The evaluation**

- Evaluation 1: Questionnaire
 - 165/223 level 2 psychology students sampled
- Evaluation 2: Focus group
 - 5 level 1 students
 - 2 had attended a session, 3 had never been

University of Glasgow **Q1: How many sessions did you attend last year in level 1?**

Number of sessions	Percentage
0	77.6%
1	9.1%
2 or 3	9.1%
4+	4.2%

- 4.2% had attended 4 or more PAL sessions
- 9.1% students had been to 2 or 3 PAL sessions
- 9.1% had attended 1 PAL session
- 77.6% of students had never attended a PAL session

University of Glasgow **Q2: When you did not attend PAL, why was this?**

Reason	Percentage
No query	60%
Too busy	33.3%
Friends don't go	32.1%
No time	23.6%
Don't what it is	18.8%
Didn't get around to it	17%

- 60% of students had no specific questions they wanted to ask
- 33.3% said they had other commitments when PAL was on*
- 32.1% didn't have friends going to PAL
- 23.6% said they had no time to go
- 18.8% didn't really know what PAL is*
- 17% had no particular reason, they just didn't get around to it

* Converging findings from Longfellow et al., 2008; Hughes 2011; Tariq, 2005; Hammond et al., 2010

University of Glasgow **Focus group: emerging themes**

Why students don't go

- (1) Time management, (2) Seeking specific help

"Well I have never been to a session, but the reason is mainly because I leave everything to the last minute! So I am usually doing the coursework the night before and by then I have missed all the PAL sessions, even though at that point I wish I had gone."

"Yes I can see the benefits, but I'm the same, always leave it too late."

"The only reason I don't go is laziness"

University of Glasgow **Q3: Can you identify what would have encouraged you to attend some/more PAL sessions?**

Factor	Percentage
Topic advertised	38.8%
More info	29.7%
1st PAL compulsory	20.6%
Friend going	18.2%
More availability	15.8%

- 38.8% would go if they had a better idea of the PAL session content
- 29.7% wanted to know more about what PAL is before attending
- 20.6% thought that a compulsory first would be a good idea
- 18.2% would be encouraged to go, if someone they knew was going
- 15.8% said they would go if there were more sessions available

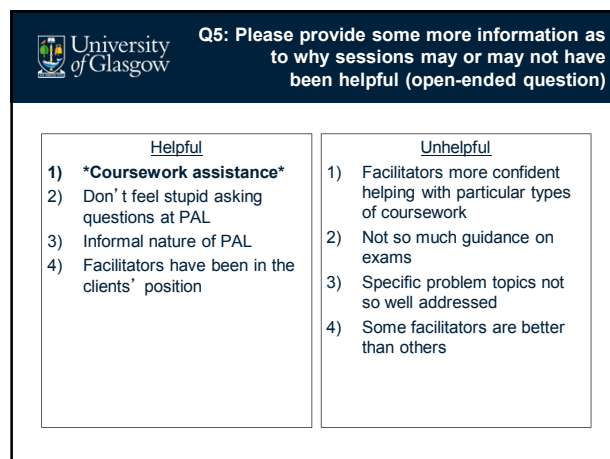
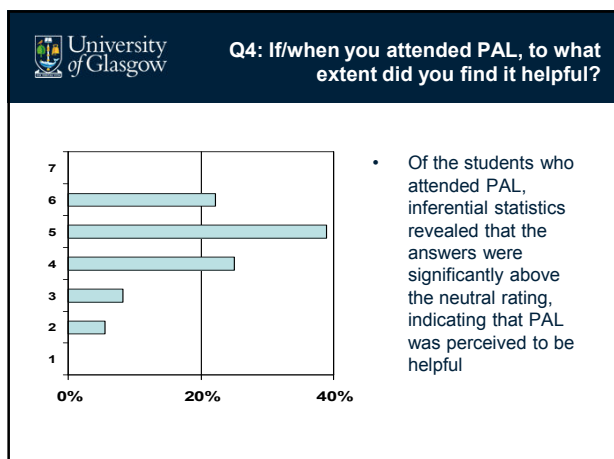
University of Glasgow **Focus group: emerging themes**

What would encourage students to go

- (2) Seeking specific help

"I think [knowing the topic in advance] would be good. If one week they say they are discussing a part of the lab report then people who are interested in that part would attend. Or we are discussing a theme or an essay title and those who are doing that essay could attend and ask questions for that specific essay question."

"I would be more interested in going if I knew the topic in advance, like if I went 2 weeks ago, then I might think there is no point attending again this week as it is going to be the same as last time."



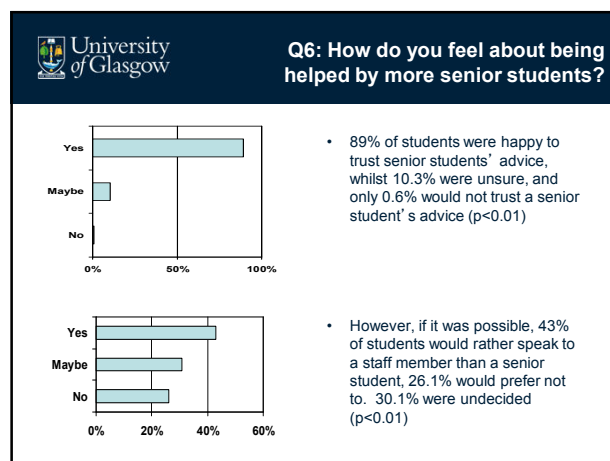
University of Glasgow

Focus group: emerging themes

(3) Facilitators

"Sometimes you get people who are more prepared, better students I guess, I don't know? Then other times they are not as well prepared as the others. It's great that they volunteer for it, but I feel some should be better prepared."

"I just felt that they just weren't that into the subject I was interested in. But I remember mentioning some authors that are really well known, yet they hadn't heard of them, so I just thought why am I here? Still I didn't do great with my lab report, so maybe what I thought I knew wasn't that great?"



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Focus group: emerging themes

However, students would like staff members to answer their questions (p<0.01) but understand that staff don't always have the time to help/explain the issues they need extra support with (p<0.01).

(4) Student Shyness

"There is a lot less pressure talking to students rather than asking a lecturer, as you are frightened to ask them a question in case you look stupid."

"When talking to a student they comfort you even if you ask something stupid."

"Yeah I agree, we talk amongst students rather than email a lecturer."

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Q7: How structured/unstructured do you think PAL sessions should be?

Mixed bag:

- Most students thought it would be a good idea to have facilitators available to run sessions not tied to a particular topic (p<0.01)
- However, when asked if set topics would be a good thing, the sample was divided
 - Unstructured is good because some students just want a chat to open up possible discussion areas (p<0.01)
 - Structured is good because students know what to expect on attendance, so that it's relevant (p<0.01) (see also Hammond et al., 2010)



Focus group: emerging themes

(4) Student Shyness, and (5) Structure/Flexibility within sessions

"... structure ... would be great and offer more assistance, but maybe leave it open to questions at the end of the session."

"I think starting a session with structure, more like a tutorial would help put people at ease for the part were they get to ask questions, because no one wants to be the first to ask a question, or the second, or third, would be easier if it was more interactive and flowing by the question asking point."

"If it was structured they might actually deal with your question in the structure then you don't have to ask, which is a relief."



Focus group: emerging themes

(5) Flexibility between sessions & (1) Time management

"Well I think structure is good but if it was the last week of a deadline and you are stuck on something that has already been covered or isn't being covered that week it means you won't get the opportunity to get help. So we still need general sessions."

"Yeah maybe leading up to the deadline have structured sessions that concentrate on different aspects of a lab report, or different essay questions but on the last week it needs to be general so everyone can ask their questions and get the help they need when they are in a panic."

"Panic sessions?"



Summary & conclusions

• The problems

Don't know about it

Hammond et al. (2010)

Time management

Specific help

Smith et al. (2007)

Facilitators

(Shy/insecure)

• The solutions?

Make more visible (times?)

White et al. (2011)

Student friendly video?

Structure session topic?

Hammond et al. (2010)

Have "panic sessions"?

Make compulsory?

Tenny & Houck (2003);

Hughes (2011)