
Instructional Strategies in the Peer Learning

The use of instructional strategies that require students to be more actively involved in the learning process is now strongly advocated for primary, secondary and tertiary education in Singapore. Peer learning provides such an educational strategy.

Peer learning essentially refers to students learning with and from each other as fellow learners without any implied authority to any individual, based on the tenet that “Students learn a great deal by explaining their ideas to others and by participating in activities in which they can learn from their peers” (Boud, 2001).

Today, information technology (e.g. computer programs/databases, Internet facilities) has provided “students with excellent opportunities to learn without requiring a teacher to transmit the available information” (Bohuijs, 1998), thereby necessitating a shift in paradigm from the highly teacher-centered to learner-centered education (e.g. peer learning) in which students are expected to take greater initiative and responsibility to manage more of their own learning and educational/personal development.

In peer learning, students will construct their own meaning and understanding of what they need to learn. Essentially, students will be involved in searching for, collecting, analyzing, evaluating, integrating and applying information to complete an assignment or solve a problem. Thus, students will engage themselves intellectually, emotionally and socially in “constructive conversation” and learn by talking and questioning each other’s views and reaching consensus or dissent (Boud, 2001).

Peer learning is optimized when incorporated as an integral component of a curriculum, paying special attention to:

Creating a conducive learning environment: Students must build mutual respect for and trust and confidence in one another, so that they “feel free to express opinions, test ideas, and ask for, or offer help when it is needed” (Smith, 1983).

Peer learning can be further enhanced if the “environment of mutual help...continues over time and beyond the classroom” (Boud, 2001). Thus, students are individually and collectively accountable for optimising their own learning and achievements.

Learning in small collaborative groups: Many of the key elements for effective peer learning are often incorporated in the design of small collaborative learning groups, and “research shows

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that students who engage in collaborative learning and group study perform better academically, persist longer, feel better about the educational experience, and have enhanced self-esteem” (Landis, 2000). Furthermore, “the peer support...is a powerful psychological ballast to critical thinking efforts” (Brookfield, 1987).

In addition to content knowledge acquisition, peer learning, especially in small collaborative groups, nurtures and fosters the development of:

self-directed learning skills, and thus lays the foundation for life-long continuing self-education;

critical thinking and problem-solving skills;

communication, interpersonal and teamwork skills;

and learning through self, peer assessment and critical reflection.

Peer learning also strongly motivates learning often attributed to the fun and joy of learning in small groups. The outcomes of peer learning ultimately depend on the design strategy, outcome objectives of the course, facilitating skills of the teacher, and the commitment of students and teachers.

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