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Foreword

D. Martin
University of Missouri, USA

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Foreword

Deanna Martin, Ph. D

*Founder of Supplemental Instruction / PASS,
Former director of the Center for Academic Development,
University of Missouri-Kansas City*

In our field of higher education, researchers agree that students in the process of constructing knowledge benefit from peer collaborative learning. In fact, as a social species, all of us take part in a wide range of peer learning experiences each day. Those of us engaged in the study of peer learning seek to discover practices that prove highly effective in terms of student learning and persistence, as well as those that are transportable from one institution to another. The *Australasian Journal of Peer Learning* is dedicated to bringing its readers those articles that represent the best research and practices in the field. This foreword takes a brief look at Supplemental Instruction, or PASS, which has held a respected place in the field of peer learning since the early 1970s.

Supplemental Instruction, which Australian users of the model have brilliantly renamed and adapted into PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) has now reached the mature middle age of 35 years. Many ask what has given SI its staying power over the years. It's such a simple idea: find the trouble spots in the curriculum; and with the permission of the lecturer, ask a student who has done well in the subject to help others master the content through small group collaborative activities; pay the group Leader; train the Leader to do certain things and not do others; record and analyse the data, and *voilà*, you have something that works. Let me tell you the story of Supplemental Instruction, from its beginnings at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, to its widespread international adoption.

In the 1960's and 1970's the gatekeepers in our institutions, often with a lot of reservation, began to enroll students that a decade before would not have been admitted. While resentment rose high in many quarters of the campus, there were those of us who were thrilled by this new openness. Of course there were problems with retention, and soon there was a committee to study the problem.

For some of you who are too young to remember, the state of the art among retention gurus (and you could count them on the fingers of one hand) revolved around traditional approaches: study skills classes, adjunct courses, individual tutoring, and remedial course work that was later formalised by the diagnostic testing industry and renamed 'developmental education.' The reported results were poor and data elusive. The efforts that looked promising, like Martha Maxwell's adjunct courses, were highly expensive to run and operate. The SI pilot came to the attention of a local funder who was concerned about the strong, negative reaction of the nearby Kansas City community over the fact that many of the graduates of inner city schools were failing their courses at the University. Aware of the importance of community support for the local university, he offered

funding for a minority retention program. The grant from his foundation (which was all of \$7000) targeted our health science schools. UMKC had demonstrated practically no success at retaining minority and rural students. One of our schools had never graduated a minority. I had an idea of an approach that might work, and so the grant came to me, and SI was born.

Results turned out to be impressive. Low grades and failures were cut in half almost wherever we instituted SI, although I must acknowledge that we picked the low-lying fruit and targeted classes with the highest failure rates where we might make the greatest difference with the least effort. We looked for alternative explanations for the differences in grades by controlling for factors like age, sex, race, working, entry level scores, high school grades, and motivation. We looked at what happened to courses when for one reason or another we skipped SI for a semester. In such courses, grades returned to the original baseline when we discontinued our program. Resuming our peer learning model the following semester, we saw the salutary effect pop back up. After the pilot phase, the committee approved SI as the UMKC approach in all faculties.

Soon others began to adopt our program. Adoption was a simple process: requests came in and we said yes. We created training programs that were offered as a public service with perhaps some remuneration for travel as appropriate. After a few years the Midwest Regional Director of Higher Education for the US Department of Education encouraged us to submit SI with evidence of its replication to the Joint Dissemination and Review Panel within the Department of Education. There were three criteria: the results had to be both statistically and educationally meaningful; the program had to be cost effective; and the program had to be transportable across institutions. We submitted our data, answered questions, and after a tense wait, learned that we had passed unanimously. Subsequently, we received 12 years of funding to train faculties on other campuses to introduce and sustain an SI program.

The government's big boost launched our local Kansas City program onto the national scene. The funds allowed us to develop our training materials and the Certified National Trainers program, when SI grew to such an extent that we could no longer handle all the demands for training. The end result now exists in the form of a field of practitioners that span the world. It is this field of practitioners who adopt and adapt and contextualize and publish and share on various listserves. These practitioners are the backbone of SI.

The problems that led various nations to adopt SI differed significantly from country to country, and Australia faced unique, systemic problems that generated interest in SI. At the time that Australians showed an interest in what became PASS I had the privilege of helping the faculties at QUT and several other universities figure out some of the ways we needed to contextualise the program for the Australian environment. Later, one of my staff spent a semester in Brisbane as we tried to fit an educational model designed for the United States into a country with different educational structure, culture, and needs. But the amazing thing is that it can be done.

2008 finds Supplemental Instruction in a very strong position, with support available at national and international levels. The International Center for Supplemental Instruction is located at the University of Missouri-Kansas City under the direction of Dr. Glen Jacobs, Executive Director. Over the last several years, national centers such as the one at The University of Wollongong have been formed and SI/PASS National Trainers, such as Sally Rogan, have been certified across the world through the International Center at UMKC.

Individuals from more than 1500 colleges and universities in 29 countries have been trained in the SI model. There is no less need for SI than there was when it began in 1973 at UMKC. Because of our expansive field of dedicated and creative practitioners, the future of SI as a peer learning model looks very bright. First of all, the use of technology has given expression to an explosion of connectivity among people all over the globe. Peer learning programs that actually organised students to master concepts in the academic arena were not so common 35 years ago, but peers today think nothing of picking up their mobile phones and texting a message to a friend when a crucial piece of information is needed or if a debate has not yet been settled. Without doubt, we will devise ways through e-chat or other mechanisms not yet online that will make it easier for us to organise, convene, and work within small groups to heighten our understanding of coursework, research and innovation.

Peer learning will continue to have much to offer the world. I congratulate the Editors of the *Australasian Journal of Peer Learning* on the realisation of this initiative. The *Journal* is in a position to make a contribution to the body of peer learning research and to augment practice. I hope that readers will find in these pages ideas that offer much to your own interest in peer learning.

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