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J. van der Meer

University of Otago, New Zealand

C. Scott

University of Otago, New Zealand

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Shifting the Balance in First-Year Learning Support: from Staff Instruction to Peer-Learning Primacy

Jacques van der Meer and Carole Scott
University of Otago, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Effective response to the learning needs of first-year students is a contested issue. In many learning support centres the dominant approach to developing student learning skills is through generic or tailored workshops and/or individual consultations. Although there is a place for these activities, we argue that the balance should be shifted towards a greater emphasis on developing peer-learning activities across the university. The educational advantage of peer learning is well-established. Where resources are limited, it may be a more effective way to develop student learning in large institutions. In this article we will explore the broad context of peer-learning in the context of the role of student learning support centres. We will focus in particular on the developing activities within our own institution.

INTRODUCTION

Massification (Scott, 1995) and the consequential increased diversity of the student population is a significant prompt for rethinking tertiary teaching pedagogy. Some writers however have cautioned for a simplistic understanding of this (Biggs, 1999; McNinnis, James, and McNaught, 1995). Biggs (1999), for example, argues that traditional teaching methods worked well enough in times when only selected students entered university. However it has also been suggested that changes in students' engagement with university studies, and the different backgrounds of first-year students need to be recognised in the organisation of the learning environment and student support (James, 2001; Kantanis, 2000; Krause, 2005a, 2005b; McNinnis, 2001). The changes in students' engagement include increased part-time employment, less time on campus, and increased use of information and communication technologies.

One dimension that has changed students' engagement with university is that of a less than full-time presence on campus. McNinnis (2001) argues for 'managed learning communities'. This, he says, is nothing new. "What is new is the imperative to design and manage what once usually occurred naturally when students in small classes spent most of their time together. The mark of success for such learning environments is the seamlessness of in-class and out-of-class learning" (McNinnis, 2001, p.11). He points out that just because more students spend less time on campus, this does not mean that students need less help. He argues that the opposite may be the case. He urges universities not to take any

shortcuts here: "...these academic and support strategies must be seamlessly managed and totally complementary if they are to be effective" (McInnis, 2001, p.11). The use of technology could be one way to respond to the absence of students from campus. Increasingly, web-based resources are used to provide student support such as course-related reading material, generic learning skills material, and access to further 'people' support. Franklin and Peat (1998) report on the use of 'CyberTutor', tutorial help through email, and peer support through asynchronous web-based discussion forums.

Although developments in tertiary education have accentuated the need to focus more on specific pedagogical challenges for tertiary education, some writers have commented that the problems first-year students have with getting used to the expectations of academic study - especially problems with academic writing - have been there for some time (Bowyer, Conrick, Crowe, and Dunne, 1995). They refer to an initiative at LaTrobe University (Melbourne) going back to 1980 where a number of faculties had a lecturer with the specific responsibility to improve students' writing. They also mention a 1981 conference on first-year issues where the problem of academic writing was a recurring theme. Krause et al (2005) also refer to previous generations (1950s) of first-year students, who had a need for clarity.

In various studies, students' challenges in understanding what is expected of them was brought up as a particular issue for first-year students. Many writers have argued that students are unclear about the expectations around academic writing and other skills (Cartwright, Ryan, Hacker, Powell, and Reidy, 2000; Chanock, 2004; Ecclestone, 2001; Elwood and Klenowski, 2002; Lea and Street, 2006; O'Donovan, Price, and Rust, 2004; Price, 2005). Craigie (1998) identified a lack of clarity amongst lecturers about the role of university and undergraduate teaching. In his study, lecturers of a project group were invited to help the Learning Assistance Centre of the University of Western Sydney to put together a resource helping students with their writing assignments. The Centre had identified that students were often unclear about what was asked of them in a piece of academic writing. To the surprise of participants in the project group, there were vastly divergent views on what should be expected of students and what teaching at first year level should be about. Such divergent views make it difficult to teach generic skills.

Teaching of skills is one of the contested areas in the academic community. The argument is whether academic skills, such as writing, can be taught independent of a specific academic discipline (Carmichael, Driscoll, and Farrell, 1995; Chanock, 2004; Lea and Street, 1998; Percy and Stirling, 2003; Skillen, Merten, Trivett, and Percy, 1998). Aitchison (2000) has noted a trend amongst university learning centres in Australia towards favouring integrative and collaborative approaches, i.e. integrating contextualised skills development within specific disciplines.

Arguments about teaching academic skills can also be located within a more general discussion about providing learning support. Learning support structures started to become of interest to universities as the higher education sector expanded rapidly and as more diverse student groups entered universities (Kutieleh, Egege, and Morgan, 2003). Kutieleh et al (2003) remark that the rationale of these structures was often derived from the idea that the cultures of these 'new' groups of students were different from that of the institution. They continue by saying that when students from one of the targeted 'new' groups fail, this is often

seen as a failure resulting from the group's characteristics, rather than as a consequence of anything the institution has been doing or not doing.

The questions that informed this article were: where do learning support units fit in where it concerns first-year students learning new academic skills? And secondly, in considering tertiary education pedagogies in the first year, is it time to consider a paradigm shift from teacher instruction to peer-learning primacy? And, what could the role of student learning support units be in this shift?

LEARNING SUPPORT UNITS AND CHANGING TERTIARY PEDAGOGIES

Not all learning support units within universities developed in the same way, or retained the same focus over time. Skillen et al (1998) distinguish three main approaches to student learning development in universities.

For a long time, there was the dominant model of the 'do nothing' approach. This was the 'sink or swim' approach (Biggs, 2003; Lawrence, 2005), or 'Academic Darwinism' (Chaskes and Anttonen, 2005) at work. This model did not recognise the diversity of students and their needs, nor did it recognise that all students, regardless of background, might benefit from being inducted into academia, both in a general way and in subject specific ways of doing things. The inequity of this model really came to the fore, Skillen et al (1998) say, when the population who entered university started to change.

A second approach to learning support that can be distinguished is the 'remedial' model. In this model the focus is on students who are somehow deficient and do not have the requisite skills. Much of this happens in one-to-one consultations and in generic workshops. This is still the dominant model in many universities. The inequity of this model lies in the limited number of students who can avail themselves of this service, especially the one-to-one consultations.

The third model, the integrated approach, provides development of skills within the curriculum. However, these are often stand-alone discrete activities and generally still within the generic remedial framework. Skillen et al (1998) propose extending the integrated approach to a more embedded approach where skills are integrally developed as a 'normal' way to help students to move from apprentices to experts in the discourse conventions of specific disciplines. Learning support units often play a role in assisting academic departments in embedding these skills in subject curriculums.

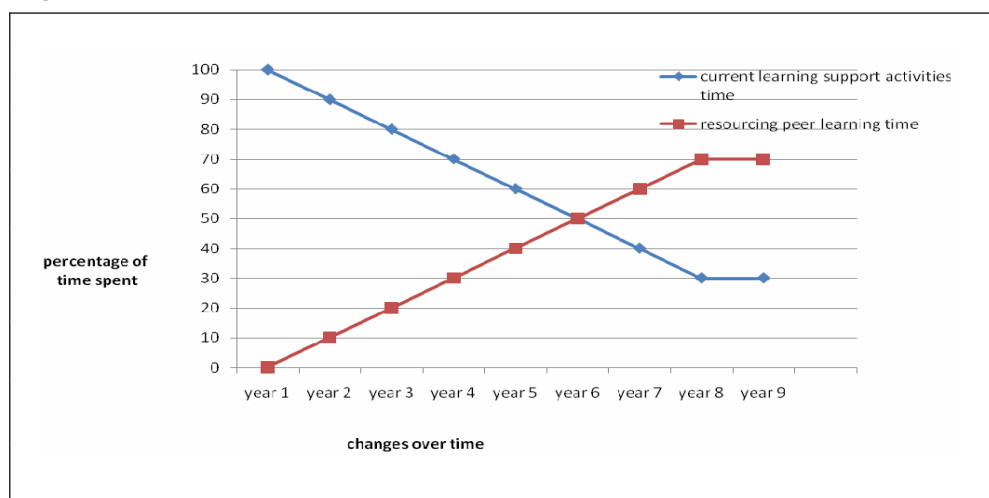
In summary, the different models provide access to support in different ways and reach different groups of students. The conceptualisation and provision of learning support is reflective of certain assumptions about the role and responsibility of staff and students concerning the 'problem' of adjustment. Whereas the first two models assume that only certain students have problems, the latter recognises that most students would benefit from support.

TOWARDS PEER LEARNING PRIMACY

Although much of the discussion on learning support and changes in how the learning environment is organised respond to the changes in the student population, changes have also resulted from other developments. Technological and other educational developments have created different expectations and opportunities. In their follow-up study of their 1995 study, McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) found some indications of a shift in first-year students' attitude towards lectures. They noted a significant decrease in the number of students who found lectures a valuable source of learning. They suggest that this may be related to the fact that more students have access to other sources of information, such as through the web. Boumelha (2000) suggests that some of the disadvantages of a mass higher education system could be mitigated by careful use of technology. Although on-line learning may not allow for face-to-face interaction, she says, there are technologies that enable 'threaded discussions' and conversations. She emphasises, however, that in spite of an increased familiarity with technology, first-year students still value direct contact with staff and other students. The challenge, she says, is how to balance the way the learning experiences are offered, for both large and small group interactions.

We argue that shifting the balance from an instruction focus of learning support staff to facilitating or supporting peer learning is a timely response to the context of mass education and technological developments. Also, success in embedding skills within the curriculum depends to a large extent on the willingness of teaching staff. Also, with changes in teaching staff, successful intervention are not necessarily future-proof. We do not advocate abandoning support to staff who wish to embed skills in the curriculum, nor do we suggest that learning support activities such as generic workshops or individual support for students be eliminated. We do suggest, however, that the balance in staff time use within these units be shifted. In a simplistic way this could be explained through the following diagrammatic representation.

Figure 1



Diagrammatic representation of what a shift in balance might look like

The importance for first-year students of engagement and connection with staff and other students has long been recognised. A high level of engagement with staff or other students facilitates access to help and support, and assists first-year students in becoming integrated in their new community. Although resource-intensive solutions to increasing this may be prohibitive, strategically allocating resourcing in the first year (James, 2001) may benefit long-term retention of students. Where financial resources are constrained, consideration could be given to reallocating some of the resources to peer-based learning assistance programmes.

Student learning support units can play a major role in shifting the balance to peer learning. Many units already do this, for example through involvement in organising PASS programs. Learning support units could champion the cause of 'peer learning primacy' within their institution and effect strategic funding shifts that enables this to happen. *Peer learning primacy* could be described as privileging approaches to student learning development that centre around actively supporting peer learning activities through an intentional lessening of other learning support activities.

A rationale for increasing or introducing peer-learning activities is not just premised on resource effectiveness, however there is also a clear educational rationale for a shift towards peer learning.

There is an increasing recognition amongst educationalists of the importance and value of students learning from each other through working together, that is: collaborative or cooperative learning. This is the case for New Zealand (Brown and Thomson, 2000; Leach and Knight, 2003) and overseas (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999; Fowler, Gudmundsson, and Whicker, 2006; Johnson and Johnson, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1998; Kagan, 1994; Ladyshevsky, 2001, 2006; Nelson, Kift, Creagh, and Quinn, 2007; Sharan, 1994; Topping, 1996). Cooperative and collaborative learning can broadly be described as active engagement of students in small groups for the purpose of completing tasks. We consider peer

learning to be conceptually belonging to collaborative and cooperative learning strategies. The key aspect is that learning development is facilitated through interaction and collaboration between students, rather than teaching staff.

Although collaborative learning approaches are widely used in the primary and secondary sector, there is an increasing interest in the benefits it holds for tertiary education (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999; Miller, Loten, and Schwartz, 2000; Nelson et al., 2007). Nelson et al (2007) emphasise the importance of this for the world of work and other postgraduate experiences. They refer to the stated graduate capabilities of their particular university as a clear signal that learning how to work in teams is considered important. Topping (1996) lists benefits such as the value of verbalisation and questioning that often occurs in students working together, immediate feedback, greater motivation, and reduction of social isolation.

Proponents of peer learning (Johnson et al., 1998; Ladyshevsky, 2001; Slavin, 1991, 1996) have pointed at the theoretical support for reciprocal learning activities, such as the cognitive development theory. This theory draws on the ideas of sociocognitive conflict whereby students realise their differing understandings of their shared knowledge base. This disequilibrium, Ladyshevsky emphasises, can only occur in situations where students are interacting. These ideas are closely related to Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective whereby students make sense of material by questioning, listening, communicating and explaining it to others (Johnson et al., 1998; Topping and Ehly, 2001).

ORGANISATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

In suggesting to privilege supporting peer learning activities, we do not suggest that one particular form of peer learning needs to be resourced or supported. Collaborative or peer learning approaches comes in many different forms (Topping, 1996). Approaches range from same-year similar ability reciprocal tutoring or coaching to cross-year different ability tutoring. The focus ranges from narrowly task- or course-content oriented to including social and skills foci. The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programs, for example, not only provide course content support, but also learning skills support. Furthermore PASS programs also tend to provide social support and assist with integration of students into university life. In our own learning support unit we are very much in the early stage of exploring and piloting peer learning approaches. Although some forms of dyadic different-ability peer coaching have been happening for some years through our academic mentoring program, we have only recently started with other approaches.

Different peer learning approaches suit different contexts and available resources. This can be exemplified by considering the initiatives in our own institution.

The rationale for piloting the PASS program in a business course was informed by the recent introduction of a common first-year program for a Bachelor of Commerce degree. The courses in this first-year program are a pre-requisite for progression and degree completion. In other words, there is a lot at stake for

students. A successful pilot would make it easier to make a case for introduction of PASS across all of these core courses in a reasonably coherent program.

On the other hand, the rationale for piloting a peer writing clinic arose from students' needs as perceived by our learning support staff. Many of the individual consultations concern academic writing. Although generic workshops address some of the issues, these do not necessarily assist students in understanding requirements of specific requirements, or progressively develop students' writing skills. At present, our learning support unit could not provide for ongoing regular support for large groups of students. Providing regular walk-in opportunities for students to work individually with other more experienced student writers could start to address some of the issues.

Language support is provided for in two different ways. Individual language support can be provided by assigning academic mentors to students. Students who want to improve their spoken English can also do so by joining a conversational English group facilitated by other students.

Another approach is being considered for the note-making and time management issues for first-year Health Sciences students. The amount of material students have to process weekly is considerable. Students need to achieve at a high level to be admitted to professional courses such as medicine or dentistry. However, some of the first-year Health Sciences courses at Otago are amongst the largest in the world. One course, for example, delivers 4 lectures a week to 1800 students. In other words, an approach such as PASS would be a formidable enterprise for our learning support unit, and difficult to resource. We are currently exploring an active involvement in setting up same-year/similar-ability peer learning groups in the Health Sciences program. This would involve providing electronic logistical support for students to set up and maintain groups, and resourcing groups with group working skills, as well as some models for how these groups might work in keeping on top of notes and managing their time. In doing the latter, we will involve past students who successfully engaged in peer learning groups.

Resourcing these programs is equally diverse. In the case of the business PASS program, we rely on funding to pay the student facilitators. This means we have to make a convincing case for ongoing funding. To this effect we carefully collected data to allow us to do so. For the individual academic, language mentors and peer writers we have set up a Student Leadership Program that seeks to both acknowledge the important role these students play (by providing certificates and references) as well as resource these students through providing them with personal and leadership development workshops. The Health Sciences peer-learning groups rely on students' high motivation to want to do well in order to gain entrance to professional courses.

CONCLUSION

Student learning support units have developed different foci over time. Although many of their activities are worthwhile, and should be continued, we argue for a shift in the balance of the range of activities. Where resources are limited, choices have to be made. We have argued for peer learning primacy in the range of activities learning support staff undertake. Peer learning activities however also

make educational sense, and provide for the need of students, especially first-years, to connect and interact with other students. We have further argued that the type of peer learning activity has to fit both the context and resource realities; no one size fits all.

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