

Winter 2020

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Recommended Citation

Bunting, Bryce D., Editorial: The Anatomy of High-Impact Peer Learning Experiences, *Journal of Peer Learning*, 13, 2020, 1-4.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ajpl/vol13/iss1/1>

Journal of Peer Learning (2020) Vol 13: 1-4

Editorial: The Anatomy of High-Impact Peer Learning Experiences

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Welcome to Volume 13 of the *Journal of Peer Learning*. In what has become customary for the Journal, this volume highlights four peer-reviewed articles from colleagues in Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

In this body of research from across the globe, the respective authors explore a number of key issues in the scholarship and practice of peer learning. One prominent theme running through the volume is the critical role that well-designed training programs—grounded in research on learning—play in both the learning and development of the peer educators themselves, as well as the outcomes observed among those they lead and mentor. Collectively, these articles remind us of the importance of truly prioritizing *learning* in the development of peer learning programs, as well as key considerations in the design of peer learning programs that create conditions where thriving and transformative growth are possible for all participants.

In the opening article, “The Impact of a Supplemental Instruction Program on Diverse Peer Leaders at a Two-Year Institution,” Hoiland, Reyes, and Varelas employed qualitative interviews, coupled with thematic narrative analysis, to explore the impact of being a Supplemental Instruction (SI) Leader on a diverse group of SI Leaders at a two-year, Hispanic-serving community college in the United States. A series of structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 13 SI Leaders to provide understanding of (a) their feelings relative to being asked to serve as an SI Leader; (b) the aspects of the experience they found most rewarding; (c) what they found to be most challenging; and (d) why they would or would not plan to continue to serve as an SI Leader. The results of the study indicated that serving as an SI Leader had a transformative impact on Leaders’ development. More specifically, participants reported that the experience helped them come to see the value of working collaboratively and seeking help, deepened their confidence and sense of belonging in academic settings, and led to shifts in long-term academic and professional goals. Based on these results, Hoiland, Reyes, and Varelas make a strong argument for the value of the SI Leader experience in developing a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2006) and in combatting stereotype threat (Steele, 2010), particularly for students from underrepresented populations. Their study provides important guidance for designing SI programs that give focused attention to the development of supportive and ongoing relationships among SI Leaders, more experienced SI Mentors, and program staff.

In their article, “Teaching Physiotherapy Students to Provide Feedback Using Simulation,” Dennis, Furness, Hall-Bibb, and Mackintosh explored the experience of six final-year physiotherapy students at Curtin University as they served as peer teachers to two groups of junior-level physiotherapy students

participating in pre-clinical, simulation-based learning experiences at Bellarmine University and the University of South Australia. Prior to facilitating the simulation-based learning (SBL) activity, peer teachers completed a self-directed online training module to prepare them to provide feedback to peer learners and to debrief the SBL activity. Peer learners then completed an SBL activity—a subjective examination of an accomplice trained to play the role of a patient with elbow pain. These simulations were recorded and served as the basis for a debriefing activity in which peer teachers provided feedback to peer learners. Peer teachers then completed unstructured written reflections on the usefulness of the training and the implementation of the activity, with a particular focus on their experience debriefing their less-experienced peers. Thematic analysis of these written reflections revealed that peer teachers improved their theoretical knowledge and clinical competence; moved from initial nervousness about giving feedback to a position of confidence and enjoyment with the process; and, finally, that the opportunity to facilitate the SBL and provide feedback equipped them with valuable leadership and communication skills that they felt would be important in future employment roles. The study highlights the value of authentic learning simulations, feedback, and reflection in the development of both peer teachers and peer learners alike.

In the third article, “Attendance Numbers at SI Sessions and Their Effect on Learning Conditions,” Fredriksson, Malm, Holmer, and Ouattara provide a thorough review of past research reporting on attendance at SI sessions. They then analyse and discuss the results of an online survey of both Supplemental Instruction (SI) Leaders and participants at Lund University exploring the relationship between SI session attendance and the learning of SI participants. Based on this analysis, the authors recommend a lower limit of 4–5 students and an upper limit of 16–19 students, with an optimum number of 11–12 session participants. In their discussion, the authors argue that when group sizes are below this lower limit, group discussion and participation suffer due to a lack of collective knowledge. As a result, the SI Leader is inclined to play too prominent a role in leading and facilitating the discussion. In contrast, the authors report that large groups (i.e., above 19 participants) lead to chaotic and unorganized discussion and fewer opportunities for all group members to actively participate. This study provides helpful guidance for those charged with designing and structuring SI programs: attendance and group size can either contribute to or hinder the effective collaborative learning conditions that are critical for SI to achieve its stated outcomes.

In the final article in this volume, “An Investigation into Mentoring Relationships of Higher Education Students in Community Settings,” Ridwanah Gurjee examines the Student Mentoring in the Community program at the University of Central Lancashire. The study used individual, semi-structured interviews with nine mentors and four mentees, as well as analysis of reflective portfolios from an additional three mentors, to provide understanding of the pedagogy of mentoring within a community context. More specifically, the study inquired into the patterns of behaviour that support the development of effective mentoring relationships, as well as how the duration of mentoring relationships influenced achievement of positive mentoring outcomes. Study results suggest that the pathway to positive outcomes—for both mentors and mentees—is defined by mentors’ adoption of an expressive interaction style focused on supporting mentees’ emotional needs and facilitating reflective

dialogue; as well as mentees who proactively initiate mentoring conversations and listen openly to mentors' advice. Additionally, interview data suggested that mentoring relationships undergo a key transition at either two to three weeks (for mentoring relationships involving young people) or eight weeks (for mentoring relationships involving adults and mature students), at which point mentees and mentors reported the emergence of a deeper sense of connection, increased confidence and transparency, and an overall more positive attitude toward learning. In the discussion of these findings, Gurjee makes a strong case for the importance of structuring mentoring relationships such that mentoring participants are expected and incentivized for continued participation and interaction on a regular basis in order to experience the relational shifts that lead to positive outcomes.

In stepping back and viewing these four articles collectively, I have been struck by how well this volume responds to a call I made in the opening editorial remarks of the previous volume of *The Journal of Peer Learning* (Volume 12, Jan. 2019). Reflecting on the overarching implications of the research shared in that volume, I suggested that “both researchers and practitioners must continue to work to understand what might be called the ‘anatomy’ of high-impact or transformative peer leader experiences” (Bunting, 2019, p. 3). Together, the four articles comprising Volume 13 of the Journal identify hallmarks of high-quality peer learning experiences, which seamlessly align with many of the key elements of high-impact practices as outlined by Kuh and O'Donnell (2013):

- Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time
- Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters
- Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback
- Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning
- Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications
- Public demonstration of competence
- Sustained investment in peer learning, peer leadership, or other peer education roles and relationships

This integrated set of findings provides important direction for the design of peer learning experiences, peer educator training, and peer leadership programs. Indeed, the authors whose work is featured in this volume have offered strong evidence that, when carefully structured and organized, peer learning positions both mentors and mentees for transformative growth (Bunting & Williams, 2017) and equips them with communication skills and interpersonal abilities that are vital for success in future employment and community roles. Thus, the very best peer learning programs are those that strive to provide *educative experience* (Dewey, 1997/1938) that opens the door for ongoing learning and success among students, even after their formal peer learning role has ended. Further, peer leader experiences like those described in the article by Hoiland, Reyes, and Varelas (“The Impact of a Supplemental Instruction Program on Diverse Peer Leaders at a Two-Year Institution”) not only equip students with knowledge and skill, but also with powerful mindsets that inoculate them against future challenges. These shifts in mindset, self-

theory, and worldview may be the single most important outcome for such programs (Bunting, 2020).

Through this lens, our work related to peer learning might be viewed as a process of *designing aesthetic experiences* for students. Typically, we associate aesthetics with works of art; however, aesthetics can also describe experiences that are immersive, complete, and transformative (Parrish, 2009). Consequently, our charge is to view ourselves as designers of learning experiences that are crucial in framing and launching students' subsequent experiences as learners in other settings, including in the workplace, in the community, or in families. It follows, then, that principles of effective teaching and learning—like those highlighted in the work on high-impact practices—should guide the conceptualizing, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the type of peer learning experiences highlighted in this volume.

On behalf of the editorial team at the Journal, we hope that you enjoy this volume and its focus on research, practices, and innovations in peer learning. Additionally, we thank the authors who have submitted their work and have patiently worked with the editorial team to prepare their manuscripts for publication amidst all of the challenges related to our current global pandemic. Finally, thanks to our readers for engaging in this scholarly dialogue with us.

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20 November 2020
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