PALS online and community building: A contradiction in terms?

Henk Huijser and Lindy Kimmins
Learning and Teaching Support Unit (LTSU)
University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

In response to a rapidly changing tertiary education environment, a number of universities have implemented various peer-assisted learning schemes. Research has shown that peer-assisted learning can play an important role in helping students address the difficulties of adjusting to university study in first year. These difficulties consist not only of adjusting to academic content and study skills, but significantly also to a sense of belonging to a university community. The evidence suggests that peer-assisted schemes on campus help students establish social networks which can have a positive and vital influence on their learning and academic achievements for the duration of their studies, and hence assist with retention.

At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), the majority of students are not on campus, which raises the urgent question: how can we harness the advantages of peer-assisted schemes in an online environment? And given that the potential problem of social isolation is even more acute in distance education, how do we develop a peer-led scheme online that creates a sense of community for its participants? This paper will explore these questions by reflecting on various examples of online mentoring schemes, and suggesting strategies for future development.

Introduction

The first year experience has become increasingly important to universities as a result of two major challenges that are perceived to have transformed the tertiary education environment over the last decade: student diversity and new technologies (Taylor, 2002). These challenges, in combination with severe financial pressures on universities, have resulted in various strategies and initiatives to provide a high quality service to 'clients' on the one hand, and to combat attrition rates on the other. As McInnis (2001, p. 105) notes, "the major driving force now comes from the pressure of accountability and efficiency on institutions, academics and support staff to address the problems and pitfalls facing students in the initial days and weeks of their undergraduate courses". Peer mentoring is one initiative that is increasingly used to address first year transition issues, variously called PASS (Peer-Assisted Support Scheme), SI (Supplemental Instruction) or in USQ's case PALS (Peer Assisted Learning Strategy). These schemes are constructed around three elements of student need, as identified in Queensland University of Technology's First Year Experience Program: engaging learning experiences, practical and timely support services, and a sense of belonging. In this paper, we will primarily focus on the last of these elements, because it raises important questions about the use of technology and how this affects the social aspects of the learning experience.

Benefits of peer-assisted learning support

Measuring the success of peer-assisted learning support in a systematic and scientific way is notoriously difficult, as many of the perceived benefits are in fact intangible, not least the long term benefits of a sense of belonging. For example, it is easy to measure academic results of students who participate in a PALS scheme, but it is much harder to identify the extent to which those results can be attributed to their participation in such a scheme. However, qualitative studies consistently conclude that peer teaching has significant benefits, particularly with regards to first year transition issues. According to Packham and Miller (2000, p. 57), such schemes aim to assist:

- students who are having difficulties with certain aspects of course material;
- in the improvement of grades and social development; and
- in increasing the overall graduation grade and subsequent employability of students.

What makes PALS schemes particularly suited for these purposes is that they create an informal environment where potential intimidatory factors, such as highly structured lectures and tutorials run by perceived 'authority figures', are minimised because PALS instructors are students themselves. In addition, the emphasis is on student-centred learning where students not only set the agenda, but also decide whether they want to participate or not, and how often. Within this context, PALS schemes have the broad potential to firstly play a positive part in addressing the difficulties students face in adjusting to university in first year, and secondly to enhance what Watson (n.d., p. 1) calls the "college socialisation process, with peers providing role models and instilling enthusiasm for learning". She further notes that this is particularly beneficial where first year students come from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds: "a peer assisted learning scheme can be valuable in supporting a multicultural student group while outwardly providing academic assistance" (Watson, n.d., p. 1). A recently released DEST Report (Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis, 2005) about the findings of a longitudinal study into the first year experience in Australia draws attention to this aspect. Although it finds that first year students overall are more satisfied with the quality of teaching, there remains a substantial number who do not perceive staff to be accessible. Secondly, international students are significantly less satisfied than their domestic peers (Krause et al., 2005), and it is precisely in these areas that PALS schemes can be valuable.

At the same time however, it is important to be cautious about the benefits, as these are in most studies *potential* benefits, and they are not always supported by the facts. Packham and Miller (2000, p. 57) identify for example that demand for PALS in their Welsh context is firstly assignment driven and secondly female dominated. This may indicate that the schemes do not necessarily benefit those who could potentially benefit most from them.

However, for our purposes here, we start from the assumption that PALS schemes have major benefits, particularly social benefits that may have a trickle down effect on academic results. These social benefits are mostly nurtured in a non-threatening context of face-to-face peer interaction. But the next question then becomes: in a context where students spend less time on campus (which particularly applies to USQ), how can technology assist us in harnessing the potential benefits of PALS schemes?

Enter technology

As mentioned above, there is no doubt that new technologies have had a major impact on both university teaching and learning, the extent and potential of which we are only beginning to come to terms with. The First Year Experience Report for example identifies a marked increase in the use of new technologies and argues that "ICTs are transforming the way first year students engage with each other, with their teachers and with learning", but it also acknowledges that this development has been so rapid that there is very little comparative data to analyse this with (Krause et al., 2005, p. 83). There is however a growing body of academic writing which engages with e-learning and attempts to develop theoretical foundations for various aspects of e-learning. With 'technological determinism' (Twigg, 2003; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) and 'techno-scepticism' (Postman, 2003) at the extremes of this debate, a lot of useful material has been generated in the middle. In other words, between the initial push for technology as 'good across the board', or new technology as inherently worse than what went before, we are beginning to see a welcome fragmented approach to technology as a many-tentacled beast with many potential benefits, but only if applied for the right reasons and within the right context.

For example, Laurillard (2002) rightly argues that the promise of e-learning will only be realised if we begin with an understanding of how students learn and design the use of learning technologies from this standpoint. This is an important recognition after the initial rush to get online, and it allows for a pedagogically informed introduction of new technologies, rather than a technology for technology's sake approach. The latter led initially to a number of problems with computer-mediated instruction, which Baker, Hale and Gifford (1997) characterised as follows some years ago: narrowly conceptualised, limited in their scope, theoretically chaotic, non-transformative, and pedagogically confusing. Although some of these characteristics have received more focused attention in recent years, the basic premise that learning and teaching should be learner-centred remains. Kirkwood and Price (2005, p. 257) reinforce this by arguing that "it is not technologies, but educational purposes and pedagogy, that must provide the lead, with students understanding not only *how* to work with ICTs, but why it is of benefit for them to do so". This also means that in some contexts, face-to-face contact may be the best option if that proves to be the most beneficial from the learner's point of view, even if it is not the most attractive option for universities already squeezed by tight budgets. Mayes and De Freitas (2005, p. 34) acknowledge this in their review of e-learning theories, frameworks and models when they identify what they call the real challenge for e-learning: "to offer a reasonable level of individual dialogue in a situation where there are too few tutors and too many learners.

Can technology help to provide teaching and learning activities from which intended learning outcomes can be achieved without an unattainable level of support from human tutors? At this stage the answer to this question appears to be yes, under the important proviso that it applies to the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Twigg (2000, p. 43) notes for example that "any portion of a course that concentrates on skill acquisition can benefit from an IT format", and if we were to ignore the problematic generalisation here, this could potentially apply to PALS schemes, as they are designed in part to teach students academic skills. But where does that leave the social benefits of a sense of belonging to a university community that are mostly acquired through face-to-face contact? Is it possible to create a virtual sense of belonging? And is this equally effective? Some early examples of online PALS schemes may give us some clues in this respect.

PALS Online: Some preliminary experiences

A thorough online search reveals that fully-fledged PALS schemes are currently not available online, with one notable exception (E-College Wales) to which we will turn shortly. However, many online teaching and learning resources are being developed which address issues related to the first year experience and are thus partly relevant to some of the objectives of PALS schemes. In her review of web-based material related to the first year experience, Webb (2001) has found this type of material under the following general headings: online orientation, academic study skills, academic writing skills, student assessment, and staff development. In addition, there is some material that relates to various PALS schemes, but in virtually all cases this takes the form of general information about the peer-mentoring schemes that individual universities offer. In other words, it tells students that peer mentoring is available, and it tells students for example that mentors will provide assistance with course assignments or discuss course readings. In short, most of this material is added onto existing practices and materials and uses what Baker et al. (1997) call a bolted-on approach, rather than what we might call an integrated approach where the online materials and practices complement and/or reinforce what is available offline.

A notable exception to this is E-College Wales (University of Glamorgan) where in 2003 a peer assisted online mentoring scheme was introduced, partly because students articulated the need for a mentoring system designed to support students (Davies, 2004). Significantly, students recognised that e-learning can be an isolating experience and would appreciate contact with a more experienced student. The basic framework of PALS Online revolves around asynchronous discussion forums and is organised primarily by a team of mentors, all second and third year students, who have done well on a particular course (Davies, 2004). Based on his evaluation of PALS Online, Davies (2004) identifies the benefits as follows:

- provides feedback and a feeling of support;
- overcomes isolation;
- less intimidating (and therefore more inclined to ask 'stupid' questions);
- aids motivation by reassuring students;
- flexible nature of response time

Except perhaps for the last one, these benefits can be equally applied to offline PALS schemes, which raises the question: what is the difference? Davies (2004) quotes Hamilton and Scandura, who argue that the key distinction between mentoring online (e-mentoring) and traditional mentoring (t-mentoring) is that the foundation of mentor-protégé relationship rests on a different type of interaction than that found in traditional mentoring. This then allows for greater flexibility, especially in the areas of creating and sustaining relationships, offering greater convenience and widening access to a greater body of knowledge via a diverse range of mentors.

However, promising as this may sound, there is an air of 'technological determinism' about it, as becomes clear when we consider the limitations that were identified in Davies' evaluation: impersonal, limits to mentors' knowledge, difficulties in explaining problems, and lack of face-to-face contact. Particularly the last two factors are important for our purposes here, because they go straight to the core of the problem: is it possible in an online environment to go beyond content and skills support, and to create a virtual sense of belonging? This is highly relevant from a USQ point of view. USQ is a large regional university that offers courses across five faculties in on-campus, distance education and online modes. It currently enrols approximately 20000 students, 75% of whom study off campus from every state in Australia and internationally (Taylor, 2002). Because of the distance, it is impossible for many students to have face-to-face contact. And given the perceived benefits of various PALS schemes, it is urgent to find the best possible ways of introducing such a scheme online. We will therefore end with a consideration of potential ways of introducing PALS Online at USQ.

Thoughts and questions for the future

In the evaluation of the PAL-Online program in Wales, some interesting suggestions for improvement were put forward. The main areas of focus were to introduce face-to-face sessions, install pictures of the mentors with a short biography, initiate regular virtual classrooms or chat rooms and introduce a FAQ section (Davies, 2004). These are interesting findings from our point of view, because they appear to lessen and go against some of the perceived benefits, for example, the flexible nature of response time. In establishing a PALS Online program, it is therefore very important to keep in mind that new technologies and the opportunities they open up, do not necessarily merge seamlessly with learner needs. Stokes, Garrett-Harris and Hunt (2003, p. 2) argue that: "e-mentoring merges the approach of the traditional mentoring relationship with technology". And so the challenge from our point of view becomes one of making this merger as tight as possible, while not discounting any application of the available technology if it can provide us with the benefits we are seeking, particularly the important benefit of a sense of belonging. With Stokes et al. (2003, p. 4) we can even ask an additional question: "can e-mentoring offer additional benefits which go beyond those offered by traditional mentoring?" As technology develops at an ever-increasing pace, new opportunities will keep presenting themselves to develop approaches to PALS Online schemes that take this sense of belonging seriously, whether they be through virtual classrooms and chat rooms, videoconferencing or wireless mobile technology. If we can harness this technology, and apply it from a sound pedagogical basis, PALS Online has the potential to significantly enhance the learning experience for an increasingly diverse student population.

References

Baker, W., Hale, T., & Gifford, R. (1997). From theory to implementation: The mediated learning approach to computer-mediated instruction, learning and assessment. *Educom Review, 32*(5). Retrieved May 16, 2005, from http://www.educause.edu/pub/er/review/reviewArticles/32542.html

Davies, I. (2004). *E-xperience in e-learning: The impact of a peer assisted online mentoring scheme on an e-learning programme: A case study of E-College Wales.* Retrieved July 15, 2005, from http://www.shef.ac.uk/nlc2004/Proceedings/Individual_Papers/Davies.htm

Kirkwood, A., & Price, L. (2005). Learners and learning in the twenty-first century: What do we know about students' attitudes towards and experiences of information and communication technologies that will help us design courses? *Studies in Higher Education, 30*(3), 257–274.

Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies.* Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Laurillard, D. (2002). *Rethinking university teaching: A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies* (2nd ed.). London & New York: Routledge.

Mayes, T., & De Freitas, S. (2005). *Stage 2: Review of e-learning theories, frameworks and models.* Retrieved July 15, 2005, from http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/Stage%202%20Learning%20Models%20(Version%201).pdf

McInnis, C. (2001). Researching the first year experience: Where to from here? *Higher Education Research & Development, 20*(2), 105–113.

Oblinger, D. G., & Oblinger, J. L. (2005). Is it age or IT: First steps toward understanding the net generation. In D. G. Oblinger & J. L. Oblinger (Eds.), *Educating the net generation* (pp. 2.1–2.20). Boulder, CO: Educause.

Packham, G., & Miller, C. (2000). Peer-assisted student support: A new approach to learning. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 24*(1), 55–65.

Postman, N. (2003). Questioning media. In M. S. Pittinsky (Ed.), *The wired tower: Perspectives on the impact of the Internet on higher education* (pp. 181–200). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Stokes, P., Garrett-Harris, R., & Hunt, K. (2003). *An evaluation of electronic mentoring (e-mentoring).* Retrieved July 15, 2005, from http://www.circle-squared.com/download/EMCC%20Mentoring%20V5%20No%20Logos.doc

Taylor, J. A. (2002). The evolution of online learning in bridging mathematics at a distance: The tension between learning needs, technological innovation and access restrictions in an Australian regional university. In M. Statham (Ed.), *'Crossing the bridge': Proceedings of the 10th Australasian bridging mathematics network* (pp. 67–74). Auckland: Unitec.

Twigg, C. A. (2000, May/June). Course readiness criteria: Identifying targets of opportunity for large-scale redesign. *Educause Review,* 41–49.

Twigg, C. A. (2003). Quality, cost and access: The case for redesign. In M. S. Pittinsky (Ed.), *The wired tower: Perspectives on the impact of the internet on higher education* (pp. 111–143). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Watson, J. (2000). A peer assistance support scheme (PASS) for first year core subjects. In *Proceedings of the 4th Pacific rim first year in higher education conference: Creating futures for a new millenium.* Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Webb, J. (2001). Using the web to explore issues related to the first year experience. *Higher Education Research & Development, 20*(2), 225–236.

Author contact details

Henk Huijser huijser@usq.edu.au
Lindy Kimmins kimminsl@usq.edu.au
LTSU, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Qld 4350