

Using Students as Peer Tutors or Assessors



Peer tutoring and assessment schemes have been successfully implemented in many universities worldwide to promote student learning¹. One form of peer tutoring which has become increasingly popular in UK universities is that in which later year students, or students studying for a higher degree, provide tutorial assistance to younger students by holding group sessions in which important academic topics may be discussed.

Where a peer tutoring scheme has been adopted, it has proved to be a valuable experience for both tutor and tutee. It has enabled students to take more responsibility for their own learning, promoted creative problem solving and developed group working skills. There have also been significant benefits for the tutors who developed additional team working and leadership skills, as well as growing in confidence and developing a more responsible attitude towards learning.

The peer tutor's role is to act as a focus for the group and thereby make it work for itself and not to provide textbook answers to set problems or even to provide formal supplementary teaching. The group provides a safe, supportive learning environment for the students which allows them to:

- test out their understanding of difficult concepts introduced in lectures
- develop their ideas when solving particular problems
- take more responsibility for their own learning
- gain confidence
- develop key skills such as communication, cooperative problem solving and group working
- promote a deeper approach to learning

Peer tutor training is fundamental, as it has been shown that the tutees of trained tutors can perform significantly better than those of untrained tutors². Training of student peer tutors typically covers sessions on different learning approaches (surface, deep and strategic learning), setting up ground rules, session strategies, how to help students think creatively and how to re-direct questions. The peer tutoring approach can be implemented with minimal financial cost or staff time, aside from the initial training of the tutors.

Resources

There is a good introduction to peer tutoring within the context of Materials Science entitled 'Peer Tutoring in Crystallography' by Baillie and Grimes³, which tracks the preparation and evaluation of a peer tutoring scheme for 1st year students in a UK Materials Department.

One of the few papers to review the literature on peer assessment in Higher Education is 'Peer assessment between students in colleges and universities' by Topping, in *Review of Educational*

¹ Magin, D.J. and Churches, A.E. (1995) Peer Tutoring in Engineering Design: a case study, *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol 20, No1, pp73-85

² Schleyer, G. K., Langdon, G. S. and James, S. (2005) 'Peer tutoring in conceptual design', *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 30:2, 245 – 254 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03043790500087084>

³ Baillie and Grimes (1999) Peer Tutoring in Crystallography, *European Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol 24, Issue 2, June 1999, pp173–181

Research, 1998, Vol 68, pp249-276. The review describes the peer assessment of writing, oral presentation, group work, professional skills and other areas, and explains which methods have shown positive formative effects on student achievement.

An online peer assessment system for Higher Education, WebPA, has been developed at Loughborough University and is being further developed and evaluated by the Higher Education Academy's Engineering and Physical Sciences Subject Centres. Used successfully since 1998, the system is under development to create an open source package available to all HEIs by September 2008. Details plus an online software demonstration can be found at <http://webpaproject.lboro.ac.uk/>

How can we help?

UKCME can help by:

- Putting you in contact with staff at UK universities who currently use peer tutoring and assessment in their programmes;
- Running an awareness-raising workshop in your Department, Faculty, School or College.

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Higher Education Academy Resources

- A 'simple-to-use' guide on Tutoring Materials by the UKCME discusses the idea of peer tutoring in the wider context of a good practice guide and is available online at <http://www.materials.ac.uk/guides/tutoring.asp> This guide, one of a set of 12 guides developed for Materials lecturers, is available as a boxed set and can be sent out on request (please note that there are a limited number of boxed sets available).



- There are a variety of peer tutoring case studies available via the HEA including Combining 'Peer' and 'Online' assessment methods for large-class laboratory practicals to enhance the effective feedback to and learning experience for students, at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/projectfinder/projects/pf3164>