



## Student learning assistants: from learning advice to creating community

### Key Words

peer learning community; student learning assistant; dialogism; learner autonomy

### Abstract

This paper reports on a generic peer assistance programme conducted at Swinburne University of Technology inaugurated by the Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) centre. Drawing on data gathered from focus groups and a questionnaire given to students using the programme, the advisers and LAS supervising staff, it explores and clarifies the perspective of student peer advisers' ('Student Learning Assistants' or 'SLAs') on what is at stake in the advising process. The SLAs work with students from a range of disciplinary subjects and hence may have little familiarity with the disciplinary practices the student is engaging with. Thus, their context differs from many peer-assistance programmes where high achieving students mentor new students in their discipline or in targeted subjects in which the mentor achieved high scores. In addition, the SLAs are not drawn from communications or writing courses and are consequently unlikely to have formal understanding of writing processes and the metalanguage to explain principles of writing. Although an initial training for all SLAs includes a rudimentary explanation of the basics of writing academic assignments, and pointers on common language problems, SLAs are not expected to provide 'expert' advice to students. While the experience the SLAs have gained through their own study inform, in valuable ways, the assistance they provide to their peers, this study aims to clarify more precisely what underpins their success as peer advisers. The data suggests it is the process engaged in rather than the adequacy or thoroughness of the information provided which is crucial. During this engagement a mutual construction of understanding emerges about issues the advised presents with, and we suggest that through the collaborative work in which making decisions and judgments is central the student participates in the construction of the culture of which s/he is becoming part. Our theoretical model for understanding this draws on Bakhtin (1986) and his concept of 'dialogism', and the success of these peer-assistant encounters, therefore, is not based on knowledge transmitted (from assistant to assisted) but on the capacity which is created during this process for the advised to make judgments relevant to the tasks they are engaging in. The critical moment lies not so much in the correctness of the instruction given but in the emergence of an identity for the student for whom making such judgments is a constitutive part, and of a felt belonging to a community which calls for these activities. Thus we align this study with arguments made by Lea and Street (1998), and Lea (2005), that it is not so much socialisation into a stable set of practices which is at stake for students (Lea 2005, 193) but a process of participation in the co-construction of practices which will always be nuanced in their particular context of enactment (Bakhtin, 1986).

### References

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