

Student Learning Assistants: From learning advice to creating community

Stephen Price, Kathryn Wallace, Elena Verezub, Elena Sinchenko

Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) Centre

Swinburne University



Aim of paper

- Reports on a generic peer assistance programme (a 'drop-in' service) conducted at Swinburne University of Technology inaugurated by the Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) centre.
- Explores and clarifies the perspective of student peer advisers' ('Student Learning Assistants' or 'SLAs') on what is at stake in the advising process, when not familiar with subject matter nor explaining text/writing/grammar requirements.
- Data suggests it is the process engaged in rather than the adequacy or thoroughness of the information provided which is crucial

Drop-in service

- Drop-in service available since 2015
- Presently 10.00-8.00pm Monday – Thursday; 10.00 – 4.00 Friday; 12.00 – 6.00 Saturday and Sunday
- Located in library – highly visible, close to study/computer/talk area
- 20-30 minute sessions
- Students nominate specific issue to address (not ‘check my essay’) – not an editing service but ‘work with’ student service
- 1 or 2 SLAs alongside one LAS staff member (except weekends)
- SLAs refer students to LAS staff if SLA feels ‘out of depth’
- LAS staff mentor SLAs
- Operates in conjunction with LAS one-on-one consultations, faculty and subject-specific workshops, and embedding programme

Student Learning Assistants (SLAs)

- Undergraduate and postgraduate students
- Recruiting advertisement invites applications from students with 'sound academic record' and 'strong communication' skills
- SLAs range from 2nd UG year to HDR
- From all faculties, though fewer from science
- Growth from 6 in 2015 to 16 in 2017
- Provided with an induction session which exposes them to typical issues students present with, and ways of proceeding
- SLAs do not provide subject advice (they deal with all students) and are not writing experts

Data used

Study conducted in 2016:

- Focus groups with SLAs – 8 participants, explored:
 - motives for being SLAs
 - best/worst moments, difficulties, issues dealt with
 - perceptions of role
 - levels of confidence
 - referral to LAS staff
- Focus group with 6 LAS staff, to gain opinions on:
 - What SLAs did well
 - Difficulties confronting SLAs
 - SLA expectations and addressing them
 - LAS role as mentors
- Survey sent to students using the drop in – focus on experience using drop-in

What is peer mentoring?

- 'any form of collaborative or community action' amongst peers' (Topping, 2005, p.631) – as such, always existed!
- Topping recommends term 'peer learning' to cover two strands: peer mentoring and peer tutoring
- 'tutoring' implies tutor and tutee roles with high focus on curriculum content and usually also clear procedures for interaction" (2005, p.632)
- 'mentoring' implies 'an encouraging and supportive one-to-one relationship with a more experienced worker in a joint area of interest'
- Implies advisers "must be academically successful and have expertise in the field" (Collier) (expertise in discipline, or writing)
- Learning is "modelled by a more competent other, who scaffolds for the learner" (Topping)
- "Role modelling is the Key" (Collier, Topping and many others)
- Peer learning is "the acquisition of skill and knowledge through active helping" (Topping)
- 'peer learning . . . [leads] to the consolidation, fluency and automaticity of core skills' (Topping)
- Much of the literature foregrounds the 'skills and expertise' which are transmitted (but see Hodgson et al, and Bone and Edwards for a different perspective)

Some difficulties with 'master' model (as in apprenticeship)



Growth of peer mentoring in higher education

- Origins of more systematic development in Higher Education attributed to the work of Bruffee in the US in the early 1970s (see Eodice 2008)
- Accompanied expansion of non-traditional students enrolling in university (greater numbers of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, lower socio-economic groups, mature age, in the US returning military, first in family etc)
- Essentially a 'cultural' concern – facilitate familiarity with the practices typifying Higher Education.
- Ties in with literature on cultural biases of education (privileges values, outlooks, ways of doing things typically aligned with middle class), eg Gee 1996, but any 'critical' approach to literacy , education, discourse etc
- Viewed as different to staff-student relationship; more equal
- Unique nature of learning experience resulted in broad extension to all students, not only special target groups.

Types of peer mentoring

- subject specific; tends to 'tutoring', successful students trained to tutor groups of new students (eg PASS; Leidenfrost et al (2011))
- One-on-one mentoring in disciplines – closer to tutoring
- Discipline centred where students in same subject assist each other (PAL as described by Bone and Edwards; Hodgson et al) – neither mentoring nor tutoring
- Generic writing skills centred (typical of US universities but also found in numerous Australian and other universities)
- Academic skills centred (a broader approach assisting students adapt to the Higher Education culture (eg Collier). Often involves pairing of more advanced student with one or more new students – greater focus on navigating higher education at more general levels.

Basis of success in peer mentoring

- Literature foregrounds equality of status between students (as students) leading to equality of power.
- These lead to:
 - Trust
 - Shared anxieties, similar experiences
 - readiness to share, to take risks, to confide
 - counter to hierarchical 'teacher-student' relationship with its power relationship 'silencing' students
 - Consequent greater scope for students to engage in learning
- Factually accurate perhaps; theoretically inconsistent :
 - Rationale for expanded mentoring was perceived inequalities (students from certain backgrounds at greater systemic disadvantage than other students)
 - Great wealth of research into the gendered, socio-economic, cultural, experiential biases embedded in values and practices of higher education, advantaging certain groups and disadvantaging others
 - Equality between students due to shared 'status as students' cannot be taken as given
- Yet, advantages of peer mentoring need explanation!
- Worth brief consideration of 'power'

Power relations in mentoring

- 'equality of power' is not inherent by virtue of adviser and advisee being students [to be contrasted with the 'hierarchical' staff-student relationship]. The adviser-advisee relationship is also hierarchical, inscribed in the institutional fabric which sustains the mentoring relationship.
- Foucault: power not possessed and wielded but structural and relational (it can be resisted). Therefore equality not pre-given, but occurs in action (and so students are not 'equal') – "action on action". Power is always present.
- Power necessarily operates in the adviser-advisee relationship; the question is, what is it productive of?
- Institutionally the adviser is vested with power; can be channeled in knower-learner relationship, or can generate collaborative relationship where knowledge is co-produced, not dispensed by one.
- Bone and Edwards p65 find when teachers sat and talked with students "students contributed naturally, without sense of risk . . . It became a more equitable space", and teachers no longer treated as embodiment of "truth and knowledge' which they were treated as in lecture mode!

Dual function of mentoring

Development of Academic skills

- A range of skills modelled/transmitted to advised
- Greater understanding of writing conventions
- Greater understanding of subject content

Provision of psycho-social support

- Literature reports students state this as important, sometimes most important
- Alleviation of anxiety;
- Increased motivation (reduced attrition)
- research generally sees affective support in terms of *facilitating* the learning process (eg, easing of anxiety and so on)

We suggest the two are indivisible, in that affective elements are as much a product of the learning process as a facilitator of it – effective elements entailed in ‘becoming the kind of person’ who makes judgments relevant to higher education context

Critique of apprenticeship model

- For Topping, the helper seeks to 'modulate and manage the information processing demands' and provide 'a cognitive model of competent performance'. But questions:
- Can successful students reliably identify critical skills? (no need for research!)
- Can they formulate/represent them accurately (is not misrepresentation always a risk)?
- For students to follow a 'model' one must *already* have a sense of what to pay attention to and what to ignore in the model (there is no 'purity'; Derrida; also see Taylor [1995] on 'following a rule')
- Not only advisers but also staff: Lea and Street note staff have difficulty conceptualising and explaining what is at stake in assignment tasks, particularly in growing inter-disciplinary subjects and mixed-genre tasks (eg Law – advising clients or demonstrating understanding and sources? Education – newsletter or parents or for assessor?)

The study

- With that as a backdrop we will now look at our findings

Results

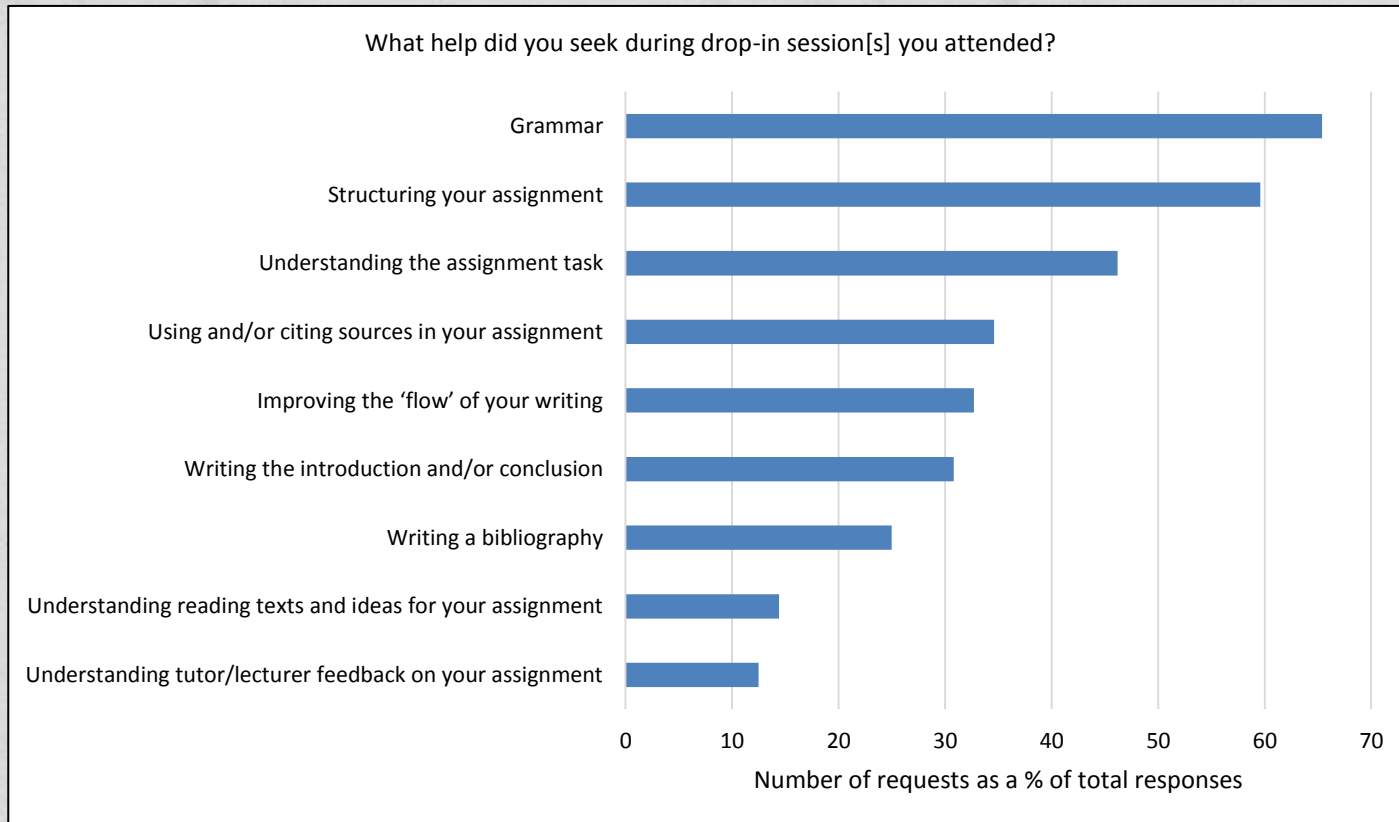


Figure 1: Types of assistance sought by students (104 responses)

Results

- The issues of most concern were grammar and structure; both of these might be seen as 'rule governed'
- Next most important (understanding task; flow; using sources) might be seen as engaged in 'understanding', not applying 'rules'
- Others to do with understanding functional features[introductions] and conventions [bibliography] and specific feedback.
- How do SLAs proceed with grammar, usually considered 'rule-bound' (both form and use) and requiring expert advice?

SLAs working with grammar

- On issues presented with, one SLA stated:

“... they [students] want you do the work for them. They just give you an essay and just want you to mark it, sort of thing....”.
- Another, about problems presented:

“it’s more of a technical grammar. . . They want to make sure their verb usage is correct, that their sentence structure is correct.”
- A LAS adviser commented

“there’s a huge number of weak second language speakers coming through the desk, which means the SLAs are struggling to work through what’s going on linguistically with an error”.
- However . . .

How do SLAs manage grammar

- Managing grammar does not require expertise. One said:
 - “it is more rewarding to help them understand how they can correct themselves”
- she adds
 - “I’ll look at first page, identify issues, how they can be corrected, on second page I underline errors and tell them to look at first page to try and correct themselves. So not there to correct, but give advice on how to improve and self-edit/correct”.
- Another, on helping students on issues beyond her expertise, including grammar:
 - “ask them more questions, how would you reword this”
- and on issues of content say
 - “I don’t know content so tell me what you want to say”.
- She felt
 - “We give them tools to self-direct themselves”.
- Central here is a process of co-construction of understanding
- SLAs use their own intuition of grammar to identify errors, but they do not need to invoke knowledge *about* grammar to assist the student.

Comment

- Here the relationship of power is directed towards producing a kind of equality – *both* participants are jointly responsible for the understanding produced and in this way the student participates in the process of generating understanding.
- The student is not ‘learning knowledge’ so much as taking on the position of, ‘becoming’, the kind of person who makes these sorts of judgments and choices which can never be reduced to existing ‘rules’
- Tacit rather than explicit knowledge involved, but not the sum of it
- navigating a very *particular* situation rather than being provided with *general* or *universal* ‘rules’ of grammar/genre and so on. In this sense it aligns with Lea and Street (1998) ‘academic literacies’
- not enough to think of literacy as consisting of ‘atomised skills’ acquired and applied in different contexts; nor as ‘socialisation’ into a homogeneous academic culture; instead see academic literacy ‘at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation’.

Further SLA comments

- Another SLA suggested they
- “walk the student through, walk the path with them” . . . hold their hands . . . saying, you might want to try this . . .”
- A metaphor much more akin to exploring or discovering what lies along a path walked together
- It also hints at what we consider important, a sense of communality, being part of something, together, sharing, and that this has pre-eminence, rather than a teacher-learner relationship.

Experience and knowledge

- Another SLA said
 - “I don’t think anything can substitute for actual experience”.
- Although she has some relevant knowledge, and acknowledges the value of the induction session, she adds:
 - “it’s more the way you present that knowledge . . . I think nothing can really substitute for experience, honestly”.
- Engaging with particular moments/experiences in space-time of which *no* other is the same, she learns something that *cannot* be taught in advance (which we can say has to do with making judgments, decisions, for which there can be no ‘rule’ to follow – Derrida, Taylor, Bakhtin and others)
- She further comments:
 - ‘we learn as we go’
- another said
 - ‘I’m providing support for others students but I’m also learning as well’.
- Mutual learning – a critical point – *together*, a *production* of understanding which *neither* has in advance, benefitting both adviser and advised.

Community and identity

- The advised is engaged in a responding to disciplinary and institutional texts from which an understanding emerges which is *co-constructed*, not handed down
- It emerges *within the specific circumstance presented* by the advised.
- **It is very particular, not reliant on an accurate/true identification and presentation of general rules at stake.** It involves 'rhythming' (Taylor 1995) or 'inter-individual identity' (Hodgson et al 2015).
- This process engages students not only in skills but in 'ways of being', which implies identity formation (Gee 1996; Kamler and Maclean 1997)

SLA comments on community

- SLAs make a number of comments on the emergence of a sense of community:
 - ‘...there is a little community forming there.... They know they can walk past that desk in the library, have a wave, a quick hello, it’s a social element which I think is important for people trying to find their place at university.’
- Another says:
 - ‘...students find it very comforting to know that there’s someone there that they can talk to, and especially having that mix of staff and students...they don’t feel they’re alone.’
- Another spoke of the importance of ongoing relationships:
 - ‘...see the same students come back, and being able to talk about how things have gone, and engage with where they’re at, as they progress through their degree’
- These recognise relationships go beyond ‘support’ (and so dependency) to a *change* in the student, leading to greater autonomy.

Student comments on community

- Students also commented on the importance of these on-going relationships and the sense of community:
 - 'Student assistants are great. I like the community.'
- The apposition suggests co-dependence between effective work and sense of community
- The value of SLA work also linked to SLAs proximity of experience:
 - 'I like having meetings with SLAs because they also study and understand [the] problem[s] we have. They relate to our experience. Always friendly'
- We suggest this shared experience is not due to a given 'equality of status' but to an 'equality' which is produced, equality in finding solutions to task at hand, themselves constantly responding to tasks/texts in ways they engage advised in
- Student and SLA comments involve affective aspects, and in many respects foreground *participation* rather than *acquisition* of something. Skills and understanding are *produced* through this process (Taylor) rather than transmitted – for SLAs as well as students!

Discussion/concluding points

- SLAs replace 'surface learning' approach students bring [check my grammar] with 'deep learning' approach – by default
- Dialogic in nature: SLA and student respond to each other and relevant texts; the effectiveness of their utterances given by place they occupy in the "chain of communication" they are engaging in (Bakhtin 1986, p91), rather than by reference to some authoritative rule or 'expert' statement.
- Collaboration nudges students towards decisions at critical points.
- Trust, willingness to speak, growth in confidence in student (Collier and others) not due to 'equality' and 'greater knowledge the adviser possesses (Topping) – adviser confidence in his knowledge may be misplaced – but a process of decision-making and co-construction.
- Consistent with Lea and Street (1998) who understand successful student writing as "in essence related to particular ways of constructing the world and not to a set of generic writing skills" (p.163), and thus "view student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation" (p.159).
- SLA instruction of student less important than dialogic process
- What is produced is very localised, particular, not *reducible* to rules or conventions
- Explanation of genre and grammar rules less important than undergoing a process
- Critically important benefits arise from dialogic process which cannot be reduced to prior expertise of knowledge

Discussion/concluding points

- The affective is concomitant with the learning; Affect and learning indivisible, co-joined with becoming the kind of person who makes relevant judgments; psychosocial and academic benefits coincide, rather than separable
- Not an argument against knowledge/skills, but for the space SLAs occupy
- Creation of a community of two (inter-individual identity) which opens onto the wider higher education community
- Student develops a sense of belonging and confidence as student develops identity and investment in the community *the creation of which the student has contributed to.*
- *understanding* (links to epistemology – Lea and Street) at the heart of SLA work, rather than skill development, although the latter ‘falls out’ from understanding.
- Understanding as (is) dialogic, in Bakhtin’s sense (1981; 1986).
 - dialogism is not a kind of scaffolding; understanding remains dialogic, always. It is never finally achieved.

THANK YOU



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