Learning together: is peer buddying a useful tool for the advancement of understanding within the context of seminars?

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Peer Learning

Falchikov (2001) describes peer learning as students learning both with and from each other within the same class and argues that interaction with peers can result in the development of cognitive skills and increased understanding. Peer learning can thus be defined as collaborative and cooperative learning arising in particular from small group activities.   However, those implementing schemes have employed a wide range of methods, adopted different activities and used different evaluation criteria (Goodlad and Hirst 1990), demonstrating the flexibility of this approach. Despite differing opinions in terms of the optimum levels of schemes, length of programmes and the structure, the research evidence is clear; 'peering' can approve attainment (Falchikov, 2001).

However, there may well be problems in the peer relationship and barriers to learning may arise on a number of levels such as situational, institutional and dispositional. For example, situational barriers are impediments such as personal circumstances whereas institutional barriers might be the organisation of timetables and the size of classes (Cross, 1981). Furthermore, the disposition of students in terms of their levels of self-confidence and view of appropriate study methods also influence peer relationships (Gibson and Graff, 1992). Finally motivation can be a problem (McMillan and Forsyth 1991). However, despite this recognition of both endogenous and exogenous problems affecting peer relationships (see Falchikov, 2001), much literature points to effective collaboration with peers as a successful and uniquely powerful learning method (Brown and Palinscar, 1989).

Peer learning also fits neatly within the constructivist paradigm of pedagogy. Constructivists view learners as creating new understandings and knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe, with ideas, events and activities experienced in learning situations (Richardson, 1997). The role of the teacher therefore is to facilitate active learning for example, by encouraging peer buddying. However, the alternative objectivist perspective in which the role of the teacher is perceived as helping students to learn about the real world outside of the learners own mind (Jonassen, 1991) would not encourage the adoption of teaching strategies involving peer tutoring. Hence, the pedagogical viewpoint of the educator will influence the style of teaching and the adoption of models such as peer buddying.

Peer Approach

The form of peer buddying used within the Sociology seminars was that of a co-tutoring approach. Goldschmid (1970) describes this as reciprocal peer tutoring when students take responsibility for the learning of their peers. For example, students are paired together in learning cells, and then following a period of independent study, they take turns in questioning each other on their subject matter during class time.

The format of the buddying system, applied over a single semester was as follows:

Teaching Week	Peer Buddying Task
Week 1	Introduction and assignment of students to peer pairs.
Week 4 – Social Construction	Oral presentations in peer groups within class.
Week 7 – Research Project Design	Poster presentations and class discussion.
Week 8 – Essay and Exam Preparation	Drafting 'plan' answers as peers for class discussion.
Week 10	Review of completed portfolio work amongst peers. Exchange of portfolios before session and peer review during class.

Evaluation

In order to assess the success of this approach the students participating were asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire in which they were able to comment about their experiences.

14 of the 15 respondents when asked felt that the peer tasks were useful for learning. The students gave a range of reasons to support why they felt the peer scheme was useful such as seeing different views, improved understanding and becoming instrumental in their own learning. Indeed, students also made a number of positive comments about their experiences of peer presentations saying that they were less stressful than working alone, they led to increased confidence and comparing work and ideas meant 'more' learning. However, some felt that the information you 'learn' from others can be unreliable. Furthermore, there were some problems in applying the model in practice because of non attendance for some of the seminars in which peer learning tasks were assigned. Despite the recognition of some issues with peer learning, the majority of the students felt happy to continue working with peers because they had interacted with others in the class who they did not know and had learned from the interaction both socially and educationally.

Critical Discussion

This study has its limitations; being small scale only a limited amount of qualitative data was gathered. More detailed data collection would have been helpful in gaining further insight. For example, the quality of the interaction occurring within the peer groups themselves could have been examined to assess the impact this had upon learning within the peer relationship. Indeed, a lengthier study could also have assessed the strength of learner benefits across different modules and learning situations as any achievements resulting from the application of this model in practice may well have been just short term gains, especially where students only experienced peer learning within this one module.

Transferable Lessons

The flexibility of 'peer learning' as an approach is an advantage because it can be applied in different ways across various subjects. For example, peer learning can

be used within other subject seminars in order to achieve general learning outcomes such as,

  I. The creation of a classroom environment in which safe discussion can occur.
 II. The achievement of specific tasks particularly seminar preparation work.
III. The productive sharing of knowledge and ideas to enhance learner understanding.
IV. The building of bridges between school and university for first year undergraduates through the facilitation of a more independent approach to study.
 V. The development of reflective practice as a key learning activity.

In terms of teaching it has implications for the organisation of the curriculum, which needs to 'fit' with the approach and be thought-out in advance. Furthermore, the approach can be tied into assessment. For example, peer presentations and participation can be incorporated as a component of module marks. Moreover the approach also fits neatly with formative assessment.

Conclusion

In conclusion this article asks if peer learning models can enhance learner understanding. Highlighting the arguments made within the literature about the use of peer learning, discussing both the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches and then examining the application of a single learning model used within Sociology seminars, the article addresses the key question of whether peer learning is a useful tool for the advancement of understanding.
The model adopted here was positively evaluated by participants thus, the argument can be made that despite some practical problems with the application of the model, the approach was generally well received and served to increase student participation at least in seminar preparation and class-room presentations. Therefore, for educators whose pedagogy incorporates the belief that interactive learning increases understanding, peer learning can be a useful tool in fostering participation especially within a seminar setting. However, as there can be problems with any group work activity the approach needs careful management and monitoring in order to ensure that when applied it meets the desired learning outcomes.

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