



Macquarie University Research Online

This is the publisher's version of an article from the following conference:

Jamie, I., Fraser, S. and Haklani, C. (2002) The student advocate : providing a student voice and catalyzing the adoption of reflective practices. *Celebrating teaching at Macquarie*, Macquarie University, NSW, 28-29 November, 2002. North Ryde, NSW.: Macquarie University.

PDF archived from CFL website before decommissioning as per agreement with Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC).

The Student Advocate: Providing a Student Voice and Catalysing the Adoption of Reflective Practices

Ian Jamie¹, Sharon Fraser² and Caroline Haklani¹

1. Department of Chemistry, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

2. Centre for Professional Development, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

The Student Advocate program attempts to both strengthen the voice of students and to increase the engagement with reflective practice by staff. The method has similarities to both Peer Assisted Learning and Peer Observation in that a senior student attends lectures in a junior unit. The role of the senior student, the Student Advocate, is to speak on behalf of the students in the lecture, to gather opinions from the students concerning their learning experience, and to take this information to the staff involved in the unit to provide timely feedback on their teaching practices. Having a student gather comments may allow more candid feedback to be obtained than might otherwise be the case. In addition, having a person other than the lecturer gather the feedback reduces the effort required by the lecturer and therefore makes the uptake of reflective practices as easy as possible. This project is being evaluated in a 100-level Chemistry subject. The outcomes to date suggest that while this system has some benefits, the cost-to-benefit ratio is not sufficiently favourable to warrant a large-scale implementation of it. However, in conjunction with other schemes, such as Peer-Assisted Learning, the Student Advocate scheme may prove to be useful.

KEYWORDS

Student learning, Reflective Practice, Peer Assisted Learning, Peer Observation

SIGNIFICANCE

The 1st year experience for students at universities is one of confrontation with something new, requiring adjustment and transition (Gadd 2000; McInnis, James & Hartley 2000). This occurs irrespective of whether or not the students are school leavers, mature age, from overseas or fall into some other category. Not unrelated to this fact is that 1st year Chemistry units have historically suffered from high dropout rates and low continuation rates through to 2nd year units. When students acquire a sense of satisfaction and achievement in their studies they are more likely to persist within a unit and continue to further units (Center for Supplementary Instruction 1992). There is considerable evidence that using senior students to help junior students in a learning support / assistance context (variously called Peer Assisted Learning, Supplemental Instruction, Peer-Assisted Supplemental Instruction, Peer-Led Team Learning, *etc*) is valuable and leads to a higher achievement of learning outcomes (Tien, Roth & Kampmeier 2002).

Scholarship and professionalism in teaching requires that the teacher engages in reflective practices (Schon 1983). Brookfield (1995) suggests that there are four “critically reflective lenses”, the academic him- or her-self, the students, colleagues and theory. The second of these “lenses”, the students, provides a way of investigating one’s own teaching through feedback. However, for a number of reasons, including lack of time, motivation or skills, the majority of staff do not obtain student feedback except, typically, for end-of-semester surveys. While these have some utility, problems with them are well recognised (Ramsden & Dobbs 1989). One such problem is that the surveys are not timely, and so they cannot be used to improve teaching practices for that cohort of students.

Another problem is that interpretation of the responses rests with the staff member. There are a number of different theories of student learning (for instance, the individual constructivist-based model favoured by Biggs, 1999; or the relational model of Prosser and Trigwell, 1999), but all are based around a view that each student approaches learning in an individual manner, and that the student has a world-view that may be different from that of the teacher. At best, the teacher may be able to set aside his or her own point of view when examining his or her teaching, but more often the case is that staff will interpret survey responses in a manner that is prescribed by their own viewpoint rather than that of the students.

The presence of a senior student in lectures may provide a way of addressing both the above-mentioned issues, i.e., student perceptions of the unit and engagement in reflective practices by staff. A senior student is more closely aligned with the junior student world-view but also has a wider perspective on the unit and teaching practices due to their experience with higher-level units. The function of the senior student is to act as an intermediary between the students and the staff. Feedback can be provided to the staff in a timely manner, which allowing them to act upon this feedback, if necessary, within the timeframe of the unit, and thus benefits both staff and students. Through dialogue with the senior student, staff can obtain information on their teaching methods in a manner that allows them to more fully understand the student perspective than is possible through standard student surveys. The senior student can express the feedback in a way that more closely matches student opinion. Having the senior student as an intermediary also promotes a sense of confidence so that the students feel that they can frankly express their opinions.

There is ample evidence that Peer Observation of lectures and lecturers is useful (Atwood, Taylor & Hutchings 2000). In this project the primary aim is for a senior student to be involved in a form of

Peer Observation, but from the students' perspective. The focus here is on providing feedback to the lecturer, thus allowing the lecturer to improve his or her teaching practice immediately and in the future. By removing from the staff much of the burden of obtaining feedback from one of the four "lenses" (Brookfield 1995), the barrier to engaging in reflective practice may be reduced. Simply introducing the staff member to the concept of reflective practice may also reduce the barrier to engaging in it. In this way the senior student is acting as a catalyst for the uptake of reflective practice. An intention of this system is that a lecturer who previously did not engage in reflective practice might be prompted to do so on an ongoing basis.

By having the function of the senior student made explicit to the students, and by being visible during the lecture period (particularly before and after the main body of the lecture) the senior student would be recognised by the students as their representative. Hence, the position is called "Student Advocate" (SA). The presence of the SA is therefore seen as a positive attribute of the unit, and should allow students to feel that their concerns about the unit, if they have any, are being addressed. The aim here is to generate an atmosphere of trust and confidence in the unit and the Department. By providing an obvious mechanism for student enfranchisement we anticipate that the students will appreciate that staff are concerned with their welfare. A fellow student should be seen as less threatening and may provide a means for students to become less intimidated by the subject.

If junior students are reluctant to request clarification and further explanation during lectures, and therefore forego learning opportunities, teachers miss out on immediate feedback concerning their teaching. Senior students are often less reluctant to interrupt lecturers and have knowledge of what are significant sections of material with respect to later subjects. A senior student can ask those questions that junior students might not ask through diffidence or through lack of knowledge. Thus, the senior student can act as an informed voice for those students who might otherwise lack one.

A related benefit of the SA is that the SA provides another person to whom students can ask administrative and general questions. The SA is not expected to answer anything but the most minor questions. The SA can also direct the student to the appropriate person (lecturer or lecturer-in-charge), but in the meantime the student's issues are at least partially addressed.

METHOD

A third-year student has been employed to attend the lectures in CHEM103 *Organic and Biological Chemistry*. This student, the Student Advocate (SA), was introduced to the class in the first lecture of the unit, and the role of the SA was explained. A call for volunteers to complete regular surveys on the unit was made.

The regular surveys (initially conducted weekly then later fortnightly) asked the students to evaluate their experience in lectures, laboratories, tutorials and "other". Whilst the lecturers were primarily concerned with the first response, the responses to the other questions were transmitted to the lecturer-in-charge.

The SA was visible to the students and elicited personal communication from them, as well as collecting the survey forms from a small number of students. The SA then met with the lecturer and lecturer-in-charge on a as-near to weekly basis as possible and through discussion with them passed on the results of the surveys and conversations with the students, and also expressed the SA's own

opinion of the lectures. In addition the SA had weekly meetings with the project coordinator to discuss the progression of the scheme. The project coordinator also had on-going discussions with the lecturers and lecturer-in-charge concerning the project.

The SA kept a journal of administrative details, summary of discussions with students and staff, personal observations on the project and on teaching and learning practices relevant to the SA's own studies.

OUTCOMES

The SA project has, to-date, shown some utility in providing feedback to lecturers, and some benefit in promoting student satisfaction with the unit. There is little evidence that reflective practice has been promoted amongst the lecturers. The SA has derived a significant benefit in personal development through observation of teaching in practice. Overall, the cost-benefit ratio is probably not sufficiently favourable for this type of scheme to be implemented if funds are limited. However, if appended to another scheme, such as Peer Assisted Learning, the cost-benefit ratio would be more favourable.

The effect of the SA scheme on student satisfaction with the unit will be difficult to determine because there was a significant amount of change to the lecturing mechanics and the introduction of teaching methods (specifically tutorials in a form different to that of the previous year and a change in the order of the lecturers). These changes, which have appeared to have been beneficial, probably dominate over the effect of the SA project.

The SA believes that the students are comfortable with having the SA in the lecture with them and that questions have been received that might otherwise have been undeclared. One example is of a student who had a relatively trivial administrative question, but was unwilling to approach the lecturer with it for fear of being told off for "not listening in class". The SA was able to obtain the required information from the lecturer on behalf of the student.

The aim of speaking on behalf of the students in lectures was not achieved for two reasons. One, the students were not reticent in asking questions for themselves, and two, the SA did not consider that there was any deficiency in the lecture material that required the SA's intervention. Based on the SA's experience with higher-level units, the SA felt that the material was presented appropriately.

The majority of comments from the students concerning the lecturing in this unit have been favourable, and required little action from the lecturers. While the students have use of the SA to pass on teaching-related requests, for instance for more treatment of a particular topic, the response from the lecturer has generally been that there is not enough flexibility in the syllabus to allow any deviations. Repeating a topic would result in unacceptable disruption to the progression of the unit.

Unfavourable comments on the unit centred on aspects that are already recognised as problematic (laboratory work, CAL component), and little additional information was gained through the efforts of the SA. There is perhaps a greater emphasis being placed on addressing those problems because of the immediacy of the feedback from the SA. The lecturer-in-charge was alerted to a specific issue relating to laboratory demonstrators that allowed a problem to be addressed early in the unit.

There is little evidence of an increased engagement in reflective practice by the lecturing staff. While it has been comforting for the lecturers to be informed that their lectures are being well received, the lecturers also perceive that there is no great benefit to having this information. One lecturer noted that there was little in the feedback that could not have been obtained through a “suggestion box” arrangement. However, as this mechanism was not in place at the time, this comment might be taken as evidence that the lecturer has at least begun to consider some forms of reflective practice through student feedback. Another lecturer expressed concern that the analysis of the unit was focussed on “micro” aspects on individual lectures, and they preferred to have information on the larger-scale aspects of the unit, such as, for instance, topic order. This might be addressed through better discussion and direction of the role of the SA, but it is probably better achieved through discussion with colleagues and student who have completed the course and can place the unit in the context of the students’ studies.

There has been a significant benefit of this program for the SA. This student is studying for a Bachelor of Science with Diploma of Education and the opportunity to observe teaching and learning in action, without having to concentrate on learning unit content, has proven to be very worthwhile. Comments in the journal kept by the SA such as “this is a great technique as students pay more attention ...” attest to the engagement by the SA in the observation of teaching and learning in action. In addition, the experience of listening to 100-level material has been useful for the SA’s current Chemistry studies at 300-level. On the other hand, there has been a considerable cost to the SA in terms of required time to partake in this activity. For this to be a worthwhile exercise for the SA, compensation in some form must be given. In the current project this compensation is in the form of a wage, which is not a negligible burden on a Department with little budgetary resources.

There is also the question of whether or not the SA is the most appropriate way of using those funds. It has been suggested that more benefit may have been gained by employing another laboratory demonstrator instead. To make this type of activity more attractive in such a context, the issue of other compensatory mechanisms need to be explored. Experience from Peer Assisted Learning and Supplementary Instruction schemes have relevance here, where compensation may, for instance, be offered in the way of credit towards the SA’s own units.

An obvious connection can be made between the Student Advocate program and Peer Assisted Learning and similar schemes. If senior students are already being used to assist in student learning, and particularly if those students are required to attend the lectures of that unit, then it seems relatively straightforward to extend the duties of those senior students to those performed by the Student Advocate.

At the time of writing this paper, the project is yet to be completed, and will be fully evaluated at the end of semester, through surveys and interviews of students and interviews of the lecturers. The present indications are that it would not be supported in the future if the cost had to met out of Departmental funds. There would perhaps be less resistance to having it run if there was no cost to the Department. Even then, however, there is little evidence that there has been an increase in use of or interest in reflective practice by those lecturers involved in the unit. Those who are most likely to be favourably disposed towards this type of program are those who are already interested in gaining student-feedback and engaging in reflective practice, and are therefore those who would be more likely to use other, less costly, methods of receiving feedback.

On balance, this scheme would not be able stand on its own in a resource-poor Department because the cost-benefit ratio is too high, but if the burden is taken off the Department, either through non-

budgetary compensation or tying the activity in to another scheme, then the argument for having a Student Advocate is stronger.

REFERENCES

- Atwood, C. H., J. W. Taylor, et al. (2000). 'Why are chemists and other scientists afraid of the peer review of teaching?', *Journal of Chemical Education*. **77**(2), 239-243.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco, Jossey Bass.
- Gadd, K. (2000). *The Secondary/Tertiary Interface*, Royal Society of Chemistry.
- Center for Supplementary Instruction (1992). Supplemental Instruction: Theoretical Framework, Review of Research Concerning the Effectiveness of SI from the University of Missouri-Kansas City and Other Institutions from Across the United States, Center for Academic Development, University of Missouri-Kansas City. <http://www.umkc.edu/cad/si/Sidocs/sidata97.htm>. Accessed 23-October-2002.
- McInnis, C., R. James, et al. (2000). *Trends in the First Year Experience in Australian Universities*. Canberra, DETYA.
- Prosser, M. and K. Trigwell (1999). 'Relational Perspectives on Higher Education Teaching and Learning in the Sciences', *Studies in Science Education*. **33**, 31-60.
- Ramsden, P. and A. Dobbs (1989). *Improving Teaching and Courses: A Guide to Evaluation*. Melbourne, The University of Melbourne.
- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York, Basic Books.
- Tien, L. T., V. Roth, et al. (2002). 'Implementation of a Peer-Led Team Learning Instructional Approach in an Undergraduate Organic Chemistry Course', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*. **39**(7), 606-632.