

Peer Learning Strategies in the Classroom

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Abstract: Peer Learning Strategies encompass a few different types of learning techniques both in and out of the classroom, including peer tutoring, small and large groups for class discussion, and online discussion and feedback. These methods have been proven effective in helping with student's academic and social skills, as long as the peer learning techniques are monitored and carefully structured.

American society values intelligence and personal growth and development. Current classroom learning structures, however, can impede this development in children. Students aspire towards perfect grades and will formulate answers to teachers' questions to provide what they believe the teacher is looking for, or do not answer the teacher at all for fear of saying something incorrect. This hinders students from expressing what they are truly learning and thinking. In the classroom, many children are afraid to speak their minds for fear that the teacher or peers will judge them, or that they will not sound sufficiently quick-witted.

Peer learning has been proven to be a successful venture when it comes to improving student's academics and social cognitive skills. With peer learning, children get the opportunity to aid in their peers' learning through tutoring and feedback. They also have the opportunity to speak more freely and with less pressure when in group settings and student led discussions. These strategies encourage greater communication among students and lead to increased academic success (Mengping 2014).

Peer learning encompasses several different types of learning techniques both in and out of the classroom. In both areas, partners or groups of students can be used to facilitate student-based learning. In each, there are aspects of teacher guidance at varying levels. The major peer learning strategies used in the last decade are; peer or student tutoring, group based discussions or group projects, and student-led classes or online discussions. All of these strategies have advantages

and disadvantages depending on their group dynamics and the way they are executed.

With respect to student dynamics, peer learning strategies foster student relationships and help students develop a greater multicultural understanding and acceptance. When students are put into groups where they can talk freely, they can bring in aspects of their background and beliefs, potentially leading to more understanding among the members within a group. Students also learn to interact with a group of people that they may not generally work with and can engage in conversation even if it is outside of their comfort zone.

When students engage in peer tutoring, they are able to learn practical skills in how to teach and give critical feedback. The students learn how to engage in learning that is not strictly teacher-led, and can engage more in the dialogue and topic questions to help with clarification. Peer tutoring can help to promote children's natural abilities in context with their learning. If kids are good at a particular subject, and enthusiastic about it, they should be able to teach others about that subject. Rather than an extreme focus on individual success, the emphasis becomes on how the child interacts with and relates to others. These social abilities are arguably just as important as academic abilities in the critical learning stages of life.

The teachers in the case of peer tutoring provide guidance, being there to answer questions and help prompt discussion. The student tutors can be given instructions and guidance before hand on how to effectively teach quality material to others, and then take over whenever they are ready to tackle the task of tutoring. Programs in schools today where students can sign up to help other students are usually run by clubs such as the National Honors Society to give the students an opportunity to earn volunteer hours. Results from case studies show that through peer tutoring there are academic improvements in scores, and lasting positive effects from the experience for both the tutor and tutee (Lingo 2014).

In the classroom, children rely heavily on the ideas from their teachers, thinking that their ideas must be validated by the teacher to be true. In small or large group discussions, the students themselves have to hash out the different points that are brought to the table. They have no authority figure to go to for quick answers. This leads to more open discussion and invites more people to join in with their opinions. It pushes students to connect ideas and do more research, making judgments not based on what the teacher says, but on the consensus of the group based on their knowledge of the content and material. Nancy Hulan describes this idea of group discussion perfectly when she says, "Because answers do not need to be polished in such a setting, what Leal calls 'exploratory talk', occurs" (Knoeller, 1994). In this group setting, leadership skills are acquired when students step up to lead discussion or help to construct the feedback on the topic. Those who know the material will generally take on this role, and the others not in this position, are motivated to learn more of the material so they have the chance to be the leader at some point. In smaller groups, students who usually do not talk in class have the opportunity to voice their opinions and are even pushed into the direction of sharing their ideas with the group.

Through engaging in group discussion, students discover how to form good counter-arguments, and learn how to question assertions made by peers. In this case, students learn how to think in much more complex terms; not just how to respond to a teacher's question but how to respond to the various group members' assertions and how to make a claim of one's own. Students get to help clarify the thinking of their peers and help in their peers' attempts to answer group questions. This leads to a better understanding of how to work for something other than your own personal success. To work as a group instead of an individual is an invaluable opportunity to build many life enhancing skills.

In group settings, questions and answers can be looked at from multiple viewpoints and new ideas can be brought in. Instead of the teacher teaching answers to issues, the students get to explore the various ways to come up with an

answer. Conflicts can be worked through multiple approaches instead of going to the teacher for the final say and the ending idea. Almasi and Gambrell did a study that concluded that student conversations were much more complex when the discussion was student led in comparison to the teacher led discussions where the student responses were "artifacts for assessment" (Hulan, 2010).

Online discussion, feedback, and tutoring are becoming more prominent as the age of technology starts. These are all mechanisms for having students assess the work of other students and give insightful and critical thoughts and guidance on how to improve their work. Teacher guidance is essential, so that these forums do not become a free-for-all. Online tutoring works when the student tutors have proven their proficiency in a given area and have received some instruction in how to tutor others. Online discussion and feedback have to be structured in a way that encourages positive critical discussion and have proponents of learning and guidance within it. Generally, online programs have proven to have beneficial results and they require minimal amount of effort and time on the instructor's part (Evans 2013).

As with every learning strategy, there are some problems that can arise from peer based learning if the program is not set up correctly. In the case of student tutoring, the tutors need to have some accelerated level of knowledge in the content area so they are able to effectively tutor the other student. If qualifications are not met for being able to teach the material, there can be conflicts and frustrations that arise from the efforts. In group discussions and projects, if there are not instructions to follow and directions and guidelines for how to facilitate the discussion and what needs to be discussed, students can tend to get off task. Effective peer learning strategies also depend on the children's level of learning. Young students have a hard time discussing and interpreting issues and topics, so for peer learning to be most effective, it should be implemented with older children; starting in late elementary and early middle school years.

Overall, Students feel more comfortable saying things to each other when the teacher is not around.

They add more to the conversation because they are not as intimidated as they are when they have to answer a teacher's question or address the large group. Group work and discussion is more individualized and gives each group member the ability to speak and argue for a point. New ideas can be brought into play and the students have to work through the problems themselves, stimulating intellectual thought and prompting students to speak up and voice their ideas on the subject, since they are the ones making the assertions and not the teacher.

Given the positive research results on peer learning, it would make sense to harness those benefits by designing the classroom experience in a way that encourages peer learning both in and out of the classroom. Peer learning strategies provide ways for the teacher to take a step back and let the students do the teaching and talking for a little while. These strategies can be extremely advantageous to the learning environment and allow a creative and interactive way to get the students involved. To be effective, peer learning does need to be very carefully structured and limited; if the whole class was based on peer learning, the students would not learn the course content from the teacher (the expert on the content material) like they should be. Peer learning strategies should be at least considered when

teachers are designing their classes so they can try out the practices and see how the effects (which so far have been almost exclusively positive if executed correctly and efficiently) affect their classroom.

References

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