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Case Study

Peer-assisted learning in midwifery

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Abstract

A pilot scheme was conducted to assess the value of peer-assisted learning (PAL) in an undergraduate midwifery programme. Volunteer PAL leaders from the second and third year cohorts ran sessions to provide academic and emotional support to first year students. The project aimed to assist the transition to university and facilitate the development of independent study skills. On evaluation, students found that PAL not only helped them to improve academic confidence, but increased their satisfaction with the course. Friendships also developed between the cohorts, which had previously worked separately. Based on the success of the pilot, the scheme will be rolled out to a larger number of students in the next academic year and is hoped to become a permanent part of the programme.

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Introduction

Peer-assisted learning, or PAL, is an educational tool in which more senior students facilitate the learning of more junior students on an academic course (Hayat, 2012). This can take a variety of forms, depending on the timescale of the support required and the topics to be covered, but usually involves group work based on lesson plans prepared by the more senior students (Saunders and Gibbon, 1998). Such schemes are widespread in many universities, but the specific application of PAL to undergraduate midwifery students is as yet undocumented. This case study explores a pilot PAL scheme run for and by student midwives at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), during the academic year 2012-2013. Resources and templates were provided by the national PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions/SI (Supplemental Instruction) centre in Manchester University, to which SHU is affiliated.

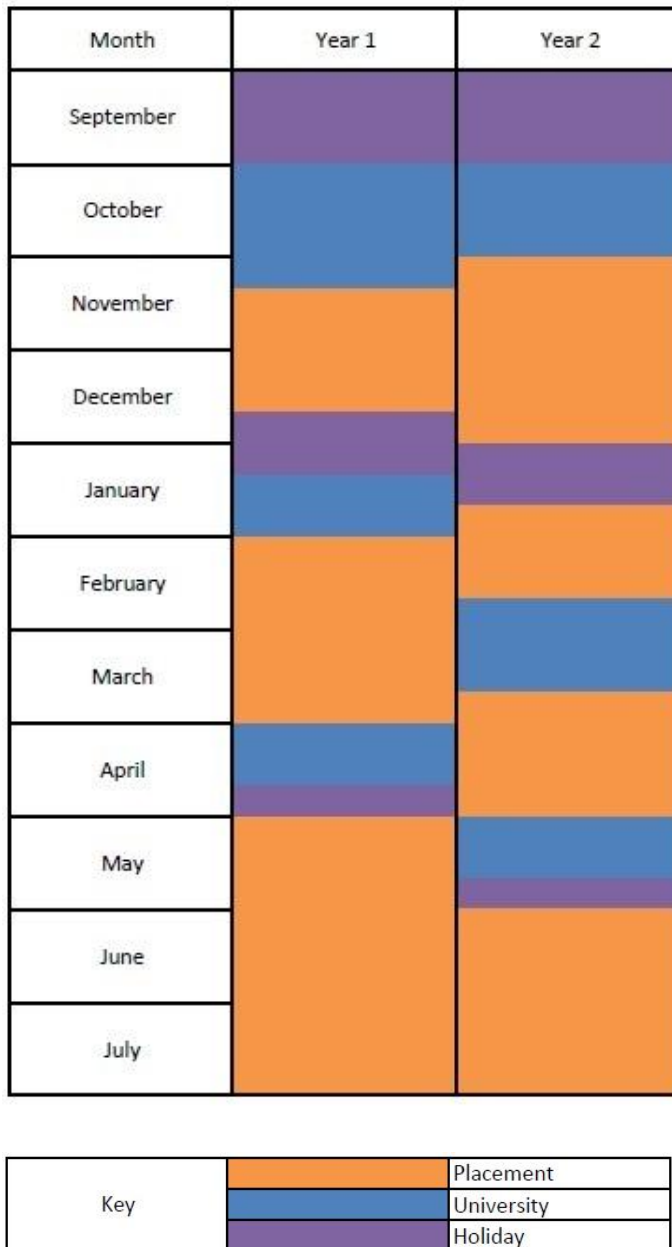
Aims of PAL in midwifery

Transition to University

Midwifery is a challenging course both academically and emotionally. Students reported finding the academic transition to university particularly difficult, partly due to the limited contact time before students embark on their first placement (see Figure). Students are required to develop autonomous study practices very quickly, in order to balance the practical and academic aspects of the course. Long placement blocks can be isolating for students, as they have little contact with peers but often encounter challenging situations and difficult emotions. An aim of PAL, therefore, was to ease the transition to university by providing academic, practical and emotional support from students who had recently completed their first year and could therefore be considered 'expert mentors'.

PALS also aimed to bridge the gap between lectures and independent learning and provide an additional channel of communication and feedback between teaching staff and students. From their experience of the university, the students felt that this was an area that could be improved through PAL, as the scheme could provide more intensive support where limited faculty resources could not.

Figure 1: Year plan for students from Years 1 & 2



Enhanced Support

Student midwives often start their course with expectations of midwifery that are challenged during their first clinical placement (McCall, Wray and McKenna, 2009). Complications in women’s pregnancies and the realities of providing quality care in understaffed, overcrowded wards can undermine students’ confidence and leave them feeling vulnerable (Barkley, 2011). The midwifery programme supports students by encouraging reflective practice to aid emotional development, and offers pastoral

support from lecturers. However, one PAL leader observed that students lacked support that was 'more than the advice of a friend but on a less formal basis than sessions with personal tutors.' PAL aimed to address this by giving students informal time with their peers to discuss experiences. Weston (2011) found that informal storytelling of students' placement experiences not only allowed students to reflect on difficult emotions but also assisted in linking theory to practice and facilitating shared learning; PAL aimed to provide a platform for this to take place.

The PAL scheme also aimed to provide a safe and friendly learning environment where all questions could be answered without judgement. Field *et al.* (2007) observe that PAL schemes were very successful in most higher education institutions as the students felt that peers were more approachable than faculty staff.

Similarities to practice

It was felt that a PAL scheme might be particularly suited to student midwives as it reflects and complements the role of the midwife. By developing areas such as communication, learning facilitation, peer supervision and support of colleagues, it was hoped that PAL would be both a natural extension of the midwifery programme and way of providing students with transferable skills for clinical placements.

PAL leaders drew comparisons between PAL and midwifery practice, as students were empowered to take control of their learning and practice through tailored support, just as women are empowered to take responsibility for their health choices.

Recruitment and Training

Selection Process

The initial recruitment of PAL leaders was via an email sent by the PAL organiser to the second and third year cohorts of student midwives. Response was not compulsory, and the resulting group of ten volunteers was self-selecting and had a genuine interest in improving the experiences of more junior students; one PAL leader commented that she 'wanted to help with PAL because I could imagine how much it would have helped me had I been able to be in a PAL group.' These volunteers (eight second years and two

third years) were then invited to attend two training days which took place in the week prior to the start of the academic year.

Characteristics of a PAL leader

Due to the inclusivity of the selection process, volunteer leaders covered a spectrum of age, background and academic ability. Research suggests that academically weaker students can be just as competent as stronger student at facilitating sessions with their juniors (Cantillon and Glynn, 2008). Indeed, they may in fact be better at identifying problems and relating to the students; having had difficulties themselves they can empathise with struggling students and offer different support. PAL leaders agreed that dedication, professionalism, compassion and empathy were more important qualities in a PAL leader, as in a midwife. See Box 1 for students' reflections on these characteristics:

Box 1: Students' reflections on characteristics of a PAL leader

'PAL leaders must be compassionate and empathetic, as the junior students look for support when they are struggling academically or personally.'

'Patience and flexibility are also key characteristics, as different students have different needs and it is important to treat everyone's concerns equally.'

'A variety of characteristics are beneficial in a PALS leader, but none more than a passion for helping other people, keen to seek improvement, both for self and others, being friendly and approachable.'

Training

The training process lasted for two days and focused on key skills such as teamwork, communication, time management, learning facilitation skills and session planning. It was also emphasised that the scheme would be student-led and would develop organically from the needs and wishes of the PAL groups. Leaders discussed how PAL might be organised and what they wanted to achieve during the pilot scheme.

Contrary to previous PAL schemes within clinical education (Glynn *et al.* 2006; Hayat, 2012), it was heavily emphasised that a PAL leader must facilitate a session but not teach. Ideas were shared about how this could be achieved and it was agreed that while no new course material would be 'taught' to students, leaders would assist

students in finding information by signposting to relevant sources. It was felt that this would encourage students to improve their source awareness, and develop and share their own research strategies.

Students completed the training with boosted confidence, feeling capable and prepared. Leaders also reported that the group's relationship 'had developed to a different level', and formed the basis for the close inter-cohort friendships that would develop during the scheme.

Running the scheme

Organisation

PAL leaders worked in pairs to lead sessions for a PAL group of around twelve first year students. Seven initial weekly sessions were timetabled, although attendance remained voluntary. Thereafter each pair of PAL leaders was responsible for organising sessions to suit the needs and availability of their group. Rooms and equipment could be booked through the PAL organiser and email and online chat facilities were available through the University's Virtual Learning Environment.

PAL leaders were able to contact the PAL organiser and link lecturer for support where necessary and any serious concerns were always brought to the attention of academic staff.

Schedule

These seven initial sessions were relatively simple to schedule as all year groups were based at the University (see Figure 1), instead of being separated between placement areas. As sessions thereafter were arranged on a more ad hoc basis the timing of sessions varied greatly between groups.

PAL leaders developed several methods of supporting their groups throughout the year. Face-to-face sessions were either formal, with planned activities, or run as drop-in sessions according to the need of the group. As well as face-to-face sessions, online chat sessions were scheduled, enabling students to log online at a specific time knowing that support would be available. Email exchanges were also used as a quick

point of contact for more urgent worries during placements, when organising face to face sessions was more difficult.

Content

Each PAL leader was given a resource pack with session planning sheets and a book of ice-breaker and study skills activities. The basic structure of each session was an ice-breaking exercise followed by a mixture of practical and group work, and finishing with a question and answer session (see Table 1). The initial sessions focused on planning academic work around the year's placements, familiarising students with placement documentation, and forming study groups for the year ahead. This was based on leaders' reflections on guidance they would have found useful at the beginning of their course, and aimed to address queries that arose from the initial intensive delivery of academic content.

Later sessions were based on subjects suggested by the PAL group and therefore varied widely between groups. Topics included lecture material, problem solving, clarifying course concepts, learning methods, assignments and exams, expectations on placement, and increasing confidence to contribute to group sessions. PAL leaders also covered topics that they knew the groups would find valuable such as referencing and revision techniques.

While PAL leaders were required to plan activities for sessions, some flexibility and improvisation was required, as the content requested was sometimes overtaken by urgent questions or concerns of the PAL group when the scheduled session arrived.

Sample session

	What we did	Purpose	Time
Ice breaker/intro	'Most embarrassing moment on placement'. Each student and PAL leader writes down an embarrassing memory from the course anonymously. We then read them as a group	Ice breakers are short games/activities to engage everyone and ensure they are comfortable prior to the session beginning	10 mins
Main activity	The students were given research articles and, in groups, asked to break them down into sections and skim the text to gain a brief overview of the topic and research	The students had expressed concerns over a research critique assignment. This exercise gave them practice in interpreting the research	40 mins
Discuss future sessions/ Questions and answers	Asked the students what they would like to cover in the future	To ensure the scheme remained relevant and useful to the students	10 mins

Attendance

While attendance was voluntary, the initial sessions were very well attended. As the year progressed a core group of students continued to attend every session whilst others dropped in and out. According to an online evaluation, around half of the students reported attending most of the sessions, while others attended between two and six. However, PAL leaders felt that it was important that PAL remained inclusive and that every student knew how to contact a PAL leader for support outside of sessions.

Staff support

An academic course link lecturer was chosen to work closely with the PAL organiser to maintain communication with the faculty, and ensure the scheme remained relevant to the course (Hayat, 2012). They also monitored timetables and availability to assist in the

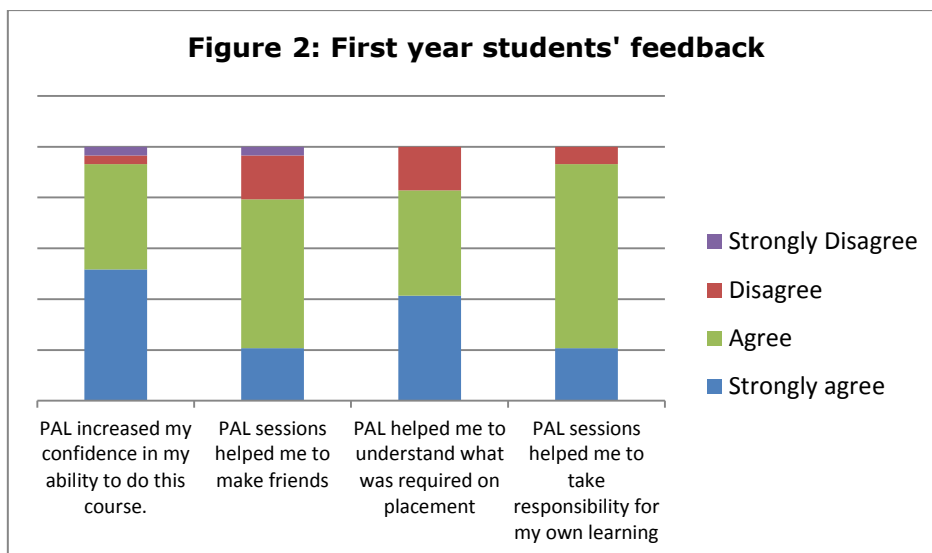
organising of sessions. Over the course of the scheme these roles were entrusted to the PAL leaders; it was then the role of the link lecturer to provide a meaningful balance of support and freedom to allow the scheme to grow and progress naturally (Cantillon and Glynn, 2008).

Debriefs between the PAL leaders and the PAL organiser took place after sessions, either in person or by email. The aim was to evaluate the session and discuss further ideas. The PAL organiser used these meetings to monitor attendance in the scheme, developments and areas of improvement. Receiving feedback from the PAL leaders was also useful in ensuring that both leaders and participants received appropriate support.

Evaluation

Feedback from PAL participants

A student survey carried out electronically in June 2013 gave encouraging evidence that first years valued the PAL scheme. Of a cohort of 50 students, 29 replied. The majority of students found the scheme either “helpful” (34.5%) or “very helpful” (55.2%), with only 6.9% of students finding the scheme unhelpful. Students were invited to comment on whether the scheme had met its original aims of providing academic and social support. The responses, as detailed in Figure 2, showed that the majority of students felt that PAL had increased their self-confidence and helped them to develop autonomous study skills. Leaders reflected that these were areas in which they had themselves struggled at a similar point in the course, suggesting a measurable improvement in support when compared to previous years.



Students were also invited to leave comments on the scheme. The majority were very positive about the scheme and a selection can be seen in Box 2. Only one student stated she did not find the scheme helpful. Some students suggested that PAL could be improved through formal timetabling and through increased online support so that students did not have to travel large distances to attend sessions.

Box 2: First year students' reflections on PAL

'I gained confidence that I could succeed in my midwifery degree. It was the perfect way to better understand what is expected of me.'

'It's good to get to know people from a different year, feel like you're part of an even bigger cohort.'

'It was confidence boosting knowing that the fears we were experiencing were completely normal.'

'I think without their kind words of support and advice, I would have found the adjustment a lot more difficult.'

'It has been the most incredible service which I am so grateful to have had. They have been kind, informative and approachable. They have taught me and helped me so much- I cannot sing their praises enough!'

Feedback from PAL leaders

A second electronic survey was carried out among PAL leaders encouraging them to reflect on the scheme. A theme was the extent to which the leaders had benefitted from the scheme, which surprised many. Reflecting on personal development, PAL leaders

felt they had developed skills such as public speaking, facilitation of groups and time management as well as reaffirming course based knowledge. The third year students in particular felt that PAL had improved their employability and provided skills transferable to the role of the midwife, particularly in communication and mentorship.

Most students commented on the friendships they had built through PAL, both within their own cohort and with other year groups. The initial training helped to build camaraderie between the leaders and encouraged teamwork and a strong support network, while the PAL sessions enabled friendships to form between all three cohorts. One PAL leader commented that:

One of the biggest benefits to PAL, and the one I most benefitted from, was integrating the three year groups of the course who previously did not often mix, enabling friendships to form and recognising that we can learn from each other and help each other to succeed.

The PAL leaders also commented on the popularity of the scheme and the positive feedback they had received from their groups. One leader said, 'I expected the scheme to run because the PAL leaders enforced it; however I was pleasantly surprised at how much the students appreciated PAL and requested further sessions and support.'

Staff Feedback

An online survey of academic staff was carried out to assess the impact of PAL on the wider midwifery programme. Of nine teaching staff, seven responded. The survey showed that all members of the faculty found the scheme helpful (28.6%) or very helpful (71.4%) to the students. The PAL organiser and leaders were interested to see if the faculty felt the scheme integrated with the course, and if it supported study effectively. All faculty staff felt that following PAL, participants had a better understanding of assignments and exams. The majority (71%) also felt that student confidence was increased after attending PAL and there was increased sense of responsibility for their own learning. A member of staff commented that 'I am impressed by what I have seen and hope that the scheme will continue to provide support and guidance to students'.

Benefits to the University

The main benefit to the University was improvement in student satisfaction and the personal and professional development of PAL leaders contributing to employability of graduates (Glynn *et al.*, 2006). Previous PAL schemes found a significant decrease in the rate of exam failure and withdrawal from the course (Saunders and Gibbon, 1998). This outcome was not measured in the evaluation of this pilot, though this could be explored as the scheme continues.

Challenges

Facilitation

The main challenge for all PAL leaders was to facilitate learning rather than teaching. This was fundamental to the success of the scheme both in ensuring that the students received accurate information and in encouraging students to develop autonomous study skills. Training beforehand prepared leaders for this role and feedback suggests that it was adhered to. Leaders' facilitation skills were also appraised by the PAL organiser through observed sessions.

Facilitation was achieved through running group exercises and discussions during which the students worked together and fed back their findings to the group. While the PAL leaders were able to signpost to resources and information, they were also able to provide resources such as definitions for keywords in learning outcomes or guides to referencing. Leaders did not give specific advice on essays but were able to identify information and learning strategies that they found helpful when completing the same piece of work. This made the facilitation offered by PAL leaders more subject-specific than that offered by other student support services. Leaders also reflected that the role of facilitator improved their own academic knowledge and research skills, and linked to the role of the midwife as an educator.

Timetabling

The main practical challenge facing the scheme was timetabling. This affected all groups and could not be easily resolved as each year group had a separate and very full

timetable. As PAL was a pilot scheme, sessions were not on the main timetable but slotted between lectures wherever possible, usually during a lunch break. Many students chose to eat in the PAL session as no other opportunity would be available, and this was encouraged by the relatively informal atmosphere. Leaders reflected that as midwifery students are familiar with time pressure on placements, this did not seem to be a barrier to attendance.

The structure of the course, with practice placement scattered throughout the academic year created another challenge in terms of communication and contact between PAL leaders and groups. Flexibility of the PAL leaders and use of technology such as email and online chat solved this problem by creating permanent and easily accessible channels of communication. The challenge for future PAL schemes is to increase accessibility while keeping the scheme manageable for PAL leaders. Several students commented that incorporating PAL into the course timetable would contribute to this.

What next?

Overall the pilot PAL scheme in midwifery at SHU was a huge success. As the scheme is student-led and flexible, some changes will be made based on feedback from students. One such change will be to attempt to incorporate PAL into the timetable and make it an integrated part of the midwifery programme.

The recruitment process will also change for the next academic year, due to the number of students wishing to be PAL leaders. All students will be invited to take part and applicants will be asked to supply a personal statement. Leaders will be selected on personality, temperament and skills rather than academic performance and as many students will be included as possible.

The current PAL leaders plan to expand the scheme into all midwifery cohorts, so that every student has the opportunity to be part of a PAL group. This will require input from midwives willing to bridge the gap between university and the workplace in a less formal manner than that offered by mentorship and placements. Two of the authors are to pilot this part of the scheme as newly qualified midwives. The other

authors are entering their final year of training and plan to offer PAL to as many second years students as possible in the coming year.

The success of the scheme has been recognised by other faculties at SHU, and interest has been expressed in rolling out PAL to other courses including Sports Science, Law and IT. The unique nature of the scheme means that these courses will be able to shape it to meet the needs of their students with the help of experienced PAL leaders from midwifery. It is hoped that the PAL scheme will eventually feature in a range of courses throughout the University.

Conclusion

The pilot scheme at SHU achieved many of its aims and exceeded the expectations of both the organiser and the students involved. In many ways the scheme is perfectly suited to a midwifery programme as it provides the academic and emotional support students need to cope with difficulties encountered on the course. First year students reported increased confidence and a greater responsibility for their own learning.

The qualities of a good PAL leader mirror many of the qualities of a good Midwife, such as empathy, compassion, patience and approachability. Equally, participating in the PAL scheme helped leaders to develop other skills key to midwifery such as communication, learning facilitation, and reflection. Planning sessions in pairs and working within the leadership group helped leaders to improve their teamwork, an essential skill in any clinical setting. The 'social' model of learning used in PAL is also applicable to midwifery as it is used in the mentoring of students and support of newly qualified midwives.

The pilot scheme has been such a valuable experience that all involved hope it will continue to grow and benefit many more student midwives in the future.

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