

“It’s Much More Than Just Teaching:” The Experience of Undergraduate Peer Educators

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Abstract

In four year colleges, advanced undergraduate students commonly provide academic support services. While the benefits of peer education for recipients are well established, the benefits for providers are not well known. We conducted two focus groups with peer educators (PE). A prominent theme was the appreciation of the perceived stigma and embarrassment experienced by fellow students seeking academic assistance. This recognition led PEs to conclude that in addition to addressing academic content, their role included increasing students’ sense of competence and self-confidence. Other benefits included the development of metacognitive skills, improved communication abilities, personal satisfaction and meaning from helping others.

Service learning has become an increasingly common requirement in both secondary and post-secondary education. An early definition of service learning (Sigmon, 1979) emphasized that benefits occurred both to the service providers as well as the service recipients: “...an experiential education approach premised on “reciprocal learning” ... [true] service learning occurs only when both the providers and the recipients of the activities benefit from the activities” (Furco, 1996; p. 2).

Among undergraduate university students, service learning has been associated with higher grade point average, improved critical thinking, mastery of academic content, and enhanced writing skills (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Jameson, Clayton, & Bringle., 2008; Vogelgesang and Astin, 2000). Other less scholastically oriented benefits have included an increased sense of responsibility, greater self-efficacy and better developed interpersonal problem solving skills (Weiler, Haddock, Zimmerman, et al, 2013).

A type of service learning that has not been well studied is that provided by peer educators (PE). Newton and Ender (2010) define peer educators as “...students who have been selected, trained, and designated by a campus authority to offer educational services to their peers” (p. 6). Peer educators generally serve in the role of tutor or mentor to less advanced students. They may be placed in charge of subject matter review sessions, tutorials, and as critical readers of written assignments or serve as assistants in first year experience courses. While discussion sessions and review sessions are often conducted by graduate students in many universities, four year and community colleges do not have ready access to graduate assistants and as a result, these academic support roles are often filled by undergraduate students, themselves. This peer-to-peer education occurs without the “built in” hierarchical relationship between academic support staff and students as would be the case with graduate students as assistant instructors.

While peer tutoring 's effectiveness has some limited support in terms of benefits to recipients of the service (Topping, 1996), there has been even less little examination of the impact of this type of service learning on PEs, themselves. While service learning and cocurricular activities are seen as valuable to student development, these types of experiences are often neglected in higher education assessment. (Bresciani Gardner, & Hickmott, 2012).

In order to better understand the experiences of peer educators, we conducted focus groups guided by a semi-structured interview format. Our overall purpose was to determine how peer educators viewed their role, their relationship with fellow students to whom they were providing services and the perceived benefits and challenges of serving in this capacity.

Method

Participants: Participants were eight (5 female, 3 male) undergraduate peer educators. All of the participants were college juniors and seniors and had been in their respective roles as tutors, student instructors who led review sessions for large courses, and/or mentors who assisted students in first year experience courses. Several of the participants had served in multiple roles.

Procedure: The participants were interviewed in two small groups with an interview duration ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews followed Spradley's (1979) guidelines for qualitative interviewing. In this approach, initial interview questions are broad, open-need queries (e.g. "Describe your experience as a tutor?") And then became more specific ("Describe your best day as a student instructor"). Contrast questions are employed to clarify concepts and their associated conceptual boundaries ("How would your approach differ if you were a formal tutor with a student versus helping one of your friends with their homework?")

Data Analysis : The interviews were recorded and transcribed. A modified version of Glaser's (2011) approach to grounded theory was used as the framework for analyzing the narrative data.. Our analysis of the transcripts was influenced by the constant comparative method in which narrative data eventually coalesce around a domain reflecting shared meaning. The transcripts were coded for themes by two of the investigators (HRS and CR). In general,, there was a high level of agreement between the two coders.

In keeping with the methodology and goals of the study, the findings are presented as a set of domains or themes. Each domain is illustrated with direct quotations from the participants. In several places, material quoted was edited to protect the confidentiality of students receiving services.

Results

Domain 1: Seeking Academic Support Carries a Perceived Stigma (*People go into it thinking; 'Oh I really feel dumb if I got a tutor*)

One area in which there was strong consensus was that students seeking academic support grappled with a perceived stigma of needing additional help. The participants indicated that receiving peer academic assistance was something that a student would not reveal to their friends. In addition, since the site for receiving assistance, the Learning Center, was an established campus location, some students were self-conscious about being seen going to the Center:

I feel like they kind of sneak down here and they are like,, will you look at this for me?' And I don't feel they are telling people – they are not like, Oh! hey, I am going to go to the writing center, they just come and it's between them and their professor... Some of them literally they come to my desk and they are all hunched over, they are not really comfortable with being down here.

This experience of initially denying the need for academic help but then reluctantly seeking out services was articulated by this PE who had received tutoring early in her college career:

I got straight As in high school,... [I thought]... I am going to be okay in this class, like I am not going to need [academic help]..., , I was very apprehensive about doing it..., I think it really helped, but I definitely think people go into it thinking 'Oh I really feel dumb if I got a tutor.'

In this excerpt a PE suggested that a student's decision to seek tutoring was akin to someone with a substance abuse problem hitting "rock bottom."

Yeah, the first time is really really hard ... because you come in and it's basically it's like the thing they always say, the first step to getting help is admitting that you have a problem. A lot of people look down on it, like at our school, if you are talking to your friends and you are like, 'Oh! I have to go to tutoring appointment they are very negative about it...

“Shame” was a common term used by the PEs to describe how students viewed accessing academic support services:

(PE 7): *Yeah, back when I started as freshman I probably would have been ashamed. At that point in time after seeing how well it worked for people and after coming to the realization there is really no sense of shame ...I don't know if I can picture myself two years ago coming and sitting down and admitting, because I was stubborn*

(PE 8): *As to whether there is like shame, I don't think there should be, but I think a lot of it comes back to a sort of weird perfectionism. You want to figure this out on your own, ...you should be getting it or something and then come ...[to the Learning Center]... is to admit that you can't figure it out on your own or whatever, and it's sort of weird like a pride thing*

The participants, in their role, as PEs were very sensitive to this issue and it implicitly influenced how they approached students who were new to receiving academic support:

[The Learning Center]...isn't just for students who are failing, it is also for students who want to do well from the very beginning or it can be for students who want to improve or just students who want to make sure that they maintain a good grade point average from the very start.

Some PEs directly communicated this “normalizing” message to the students with whom they were working:

When I get into the beginning of the semester I say like it is good to start out now at the beginning and then if you find you are doing really well and you don't need it, it is better to be in that predicament than come in at week six when we can't teach you six weeks worth of material in an hour. So it is easier to start out early and be proactive than just trying to drag your grade up at the end.

Domain 2: Learning to be a Peer Educator (For me, it was 90 % informal and 105 formal)

Of note, many of the PEs had received services through the Learning Center in the form of supplemental instruction, mentoring or tutoring. In addition to benefiting from academic support services themselves, many of the PEs indicated that receiving services had indirectly provided them with training for the role:

I first came to the Learning Center on the other side...I was put on IPASS (an academic support program for students who are struggling academically) by the University because my grades were so terrible

Besides being able to work with and observe a PE as a student, the experience of having received academic support services sensitized PEs to the perceived stigma associated with being a student requesting assistance. This experience led PEs to recognize that fellow students would likely be struggling with the same issues and because of their own experience receiving academic help were particularly empathetic:

I think being a tutee before this, like getting help from someone else was very helpful because you were in their shoes at one point so it makes you more relatable, not like they are dumb, because lot of people come to the Learning Center with the idea like I am stupid I need help and I think that is like a stigma you don't want, so I think being a tutee and like you needed help too helps you relate better with the person you are trying to help.

Both formal training provided by the Learning Center staff as well as informal advice from other PEs was seen as helpful. In their formal training, PEs found sessions that were experiential and demonstrated scenarios that PEs would likely face to be particularly useful:

I know the very first tutor training session... they had two people ...go up and pretend they have a tutor-- tutee session- kind of a mock up where you could see how it kind of runs... they did all the worse scenarios..[like when student comes for tutoring and says] ... I need you to teach me this right now.

A minority of the participants indicated that they had served as tutors, albeit more informally, during high school:

A family friend needed some help with his Math class, he just wasn't getting it and I sat down with him every week, we went through it, and I took him from not getting anything... to...was passing the class very well. So, having the experience going in I felt like I was a little bit more well prepared, but even then tutoring in a college level is so much different. I did have some prior experience, I feel like it kind of all washed away because it is a completely different environment.

Domain 3: There is more to education than teaching (*I hate those touchy emotional things, it's difficult for me to know how to treat somebody who is at risk of failing their classes, really bumming out about it; [training]..was helpful—at least to have some strategies in the toolbox*),

While PEs recognized that their role included adapting their instructional approach to the student's pre-existing knowledge and understanding of the material, they quickly came to appreciate the extent to which the role required an awareness of students' emotional and personality issues. Most of the interviewees seemed surprised by the extent to which students' psychosocial impacted the learning process. When these difficulties arose in tutoring sessions, PEs often felt caught off-guard and unsure how to respond:

(PE-8) *[The student] is just really stressed out all the time and I am trying to help them but it's hard because I feel like they almost need counseling or something, because they are having so much anxiety... I feel like they need more than just like a tutor, they need to figure out where they are at mentally and emotionally to be able to complete this class without going crazy*

(PE-7) *I would say that's probably the most difficult situation when somebody has such lack of confidence or is having other emotional problems during the session and it's really difficult. If you've ever seen that, hierarchy...If you are stuck on the bottom, you can't be focusing on this top information if you don't have the solid base of your needs covered*

As reflected in the quotation immediately above, PEs became aware of students' issues with self-confidence. These issues, in part, appeared to stem from the perceived stigma of receiving help. PEs recognized that promoting students' sense of academic competence was part of their role:

I thought you were just there teach them material...it's really about so much more than that .The amount of encouragement I was trying to give and just those facets, trying to promote confidence in them, those are things that I had no idea were there. I really wasn't the greatest at that the first couple of semesters and then I did some catching on ... promoting confidence and getting them to believe in themselves was more often [the goal].. .than actually teaching them anything

Domain 4: Relationships with Faculty (*You ...look at the notes and maybe see if you can try and pick up the professor's thought process from those notes and you just try and go from there*)

Interactions with faculty these interactions were seen as useful but on occasion, could be uncomfortable:

I have heard from other ...[PEs]like they go, especially when first starting out, like sometimes something isn't especially in their memory and so they need the professor to kind of jog it for them. [The professor may] ...kind of look at them like; "You are supposed to be teaching this to them and you don't know how to do it." type of thing. [PEs] get angry about that and sometimes, I don't know, I am not always one that likes to go and talk to professors. I always still associate that with l sucking up to people which I know you are not supposed to do.

Another common concern was that faculty did not understand the PEs role or range of services available from the Learning Center. Faculty could also indirectly contribute to the stigma of receiving assistance-- particularly when services such as tutoring were communicated as "a last resort" for struggling students

It is also like how ...[the professors]... say it too. Like if you were to say, "Oh if you are struggling or going to fail;" Sometimes the professors like say it in a tone that doesn't make people want to go to the Learning Center.

Some PEs attended classes for which they were providing support. For example, student instructors who led review sessions frequently attended the class. A particular challenge arose when the PE had taken the course with a different faculty member than the student.. PEs developed the ability to understand different faculty teaching styles and use this knowledge to work with students:

It better prepares you if you have the same professor, but if you don't you have... [the same professor] to adapt as a tutor and try and figure out this professor's teaching style if you have never had them before.

Domain 5: Challenges ("...No we are not magicians, you can't teach six weeks' worth of material in one hour")

The most commonly mentioned challenge were students who approached the PEs with unrealistic demands or expectations. These fell into several types. A frequent dilemma was how to respond to students who had not been attending class, keeping up with reading, etc., who approached the PE late in the semester with a request to have all course content taught to them in one or two tutoring sessions:

(PE 2). *I was working here over the summer, ... and someone had missed like three weeks worth of summer classes... came into the Math Center like the week before the exam and was like 'teach me all of math 'and I had to be very patient because we had to go through ...through each chapter and you know I was professor for those couple of days and they panicked and I was trying to calm her down and it was interesting, and I got them through, I don't know how well they did, I don't know if they passed the exam, but I got them to some level of understanding.*

(PE 3) *People that come in and try to make tutoring appointments ...like 'I actually need someone right now because I have a test at 8 a.m. .' [I tell them] ...Math Center is closed, like we don't have tutors that you can get right now ..a lot of people that were coming in like desperate, like it was pretty common.*

Another dilemma arose when students pressured the PE's to give them their teaching material. All of the PEs were trained and understood that their role was not to simply give student the material that they needed for an upcoming exam but rather they were to oversee active review sessions. The Socratic approach was not well received by some students:

(PE 4): *For a test I had a group of student in there and they kept asking me for the test answers and like kind of trying to push me to give them the test which I don't have ...I have my own study guide from when I took the class, and they kept trying to get me to make them copies of it, like I tried to tell them this is what SI is about, if you are stuck on part of the study guide or there is a concept that you don't understand that is what I am here for to help you through that, and they didn't really get that and I kind of just had to firmly tell them that I am not there to give them answers, and they never came back after that.*

Domain 6: Benefits *(Teaching people is going to be something you are going to be doing for the entire rest of your life... and to learn how do I make somebody feel better while also teaching the material to them... I feel it's a pretty valuable skill to have in the future... to have that skill relating with people at the same time as teaching makes you that much better of a communicator.)*

In addition to the experience of satisfaction from helping fellow students, PEs cited a number of personal and professional benefits from their work including self-understanding, teaching skills, better understanding of their major field of study, and interpersonal skills. Interpersonally, PEs credited their role with helping them develop greater self-confidence in social situations and as having developed a greater repertoire of interpersonal skills:

(PE- 2) *It has taught me to communicate a lot better with people who don't have the same understanding of something as me and ...taught me to not get upset or frustrated if somebody is not understanding what I say to them the first time.*

(PE-8) : *I would say that this job has made me more confident as a person and more willing to talk to people and ask questions and problem solve in different situations, just because it is a lot about interpersonal relations and getting to know people on that level that makes you both comfortable being around each other and learning from each other, I think it has helped me.*

Since they were providing assistance in courses taught by various faculty and were working with students of diverse academic backgrounds, PEs further developed metacognitive and critical thinking skills:

(PE-1): *I have learned there is no one specific way to teach. You kind of have to adapt depending on who you are speaking to, to figure out what works best for them and what they can grasp a little bit easier.*

(PE-7): *You have to be up high in those levels, you have to be able to create scenarios, you have to be able to create examples off the top of your head,; ...the meta-cognitive skills of these study cycles, these things that I wouldn't have thought of before, I am getting access to that, that's really nice for my own life...*

PEs developed a much deeper and broader understanding of their major area of study:

Yeah, since I have a better understanding of exactly how the beginning Algebra works and how the beginning Calculus works, as a high school teacher I now have a strong foundation in how to teach this now, because I know how the interworkings play together so I can teach my students how those interworkings play together and how mathematics is really one great big house of cards that starts with beginning proofs and builds up to calculus, physics...

While sometimes difficult for the participants to fully articulate, their experience as PEs often contributed to self-examination and reflection about personal history and identity as well as core values:

(PE-3): *I think it helps you provide like introspection, ...you reflect back on your experiences and what would have helped you as a mentor and then as an SLA leader.... you reflect on your personal experiences and your experiences as a student and what would have helped you.*

(PE-4) *Responsibility is the biggest one. Your responsibility --you should go to class, you should refresh yourself on the material and you are really responsible for helping that person and helping them excel and do better in the class and be the best they can be; ...You have to do the same, ...lead by example, you really have to hold yourself up too and I guess it is a give and take thing too because you both have to be committed and go to class, know yourself, so it really keeps you responsible too because they look up to you.*

In some instances, the self- knowledge gained provided a direction for their future:

(PE-6): *I always thought that being like a teacher or something like that would be really really cool and I never got like a chance to experience it and through this I really realized that I am more of a relationship person than like a task based person, which is what this whole experience has taught me if nothing else that relating to people and talking to people and being around people is something that I need, not only for personal reasons but in a job one day*

(PE-7): *I am going to grad school and that wasn't my original plan and I have to say tutoring definitely helps not only from a personal standpoint but it's kind of confirmed the fact that I – at least I know my topic well enough to continue schooling and I don't know if I would have had that confidence before, just practicing over and over again, I feel confident enough and have discovered a little bit myself and I want to continue on, so tutoring has been a pivotal factor in that decision*

Domain 7 : Satisfaction with Making a Meaningful Contribution (“*It's that moment... you build that relationship with the tutee and you see them struggle, it's kind of like that ‘aha!’ moment...it's that moment where like you see that flash of light that they 100% fully understand it...it doesn't matter if you spent like 10 minutes or 15 hours with them it's that moment.*”)

PEs experienced a great deal of satisfaction when a student with whom they were working succeeded.. PEs “success stories” often included an implicit element of being surprised that their help could have so much impact :

(PE-5) *Mine was when I had a girl-- like after everyone else left --she stayed after just to tell me how thankful she was that I was doing this and she really appreciated because it really helped her, that made me want to SI more and tutor it and know that I helped someone.*

(PE-1): *[A student I tutored] ...consistently never missed an appointment and was really anxious to learn, like really wanted to learn the material, just was having a hard time grasping the concepts. So he got a D on the first test, signed up with me and then like I said came to all the sessions and ended up with a B+ overall in the class. So, it is good to see him go from having absolutely no idea what he was talking about to having a pretty good understanding of the general concept.... He actually offered to buy me dinner afterwards and brought me a pizza the last session.*

(PE-8) *That's true too, I know, I ran into one of my tutees...over this summer and she couldn't say enough, like thank you so much, you really helped me, she is like, I recommend you to other people. It's that feeling that you know that they are so enthusiastic about saying that you did a good job and the fact that you helped them and they are telling other people about you, it's kind of like that feeling of it must mean I am doing something right.*

In addition to receiving feedback about students' improved grades, PEs found it particularly meaningful when a student understood the material at a deeper level:

(PE-2): *I had a session [...with a student] ...they have to do their homework ...and you can submit it and if you get it wrong you can keep retrying it ...Well, she had been trying and she just kind of gave up on it because she didn't understand it at all and she came to the session... ..we went on to her homework thing and like she then understood and submitted her answer and she ended up getting...it was like 81% of it instead of 100, but she was like: “Oh wow I actually get this down.” So instead of giving up, ...before she was just not going to try anymore but then when she came to the session I actually helped her and she got something out of it so she realized that she could learn it eventually. I think that was very exciting.*

Discussion

The participants in this study held several distinct academic support roles. Some of the PEs provided individual tutoring while others were student instructors who led group review sessions and a few had served as mentors. However, despite being in these different roles, there were a number of common themes that arose as PEs described their experiences.

One of the primary findings of this project is that the demands of being a PE extend beyond tutoring or reviewing course content. In some cases, because of their own academic struggles early in their university career, PEs were acutely sensitive to the psychological obstacles associated with seeking academic help. These barriers often included a sense of shame about having to receive PEs' assistance and new students' denial about the difficulty of college level work compared with that of high school.

PEs' personal experiences as incoming freshman students as well as the perception that other students, and even some faculty, viewed seeking academic support as an indicator of personal failure, created challenges. Because of these issues, PEs quickly appreciated that to be effective in their role; they needed to address learners' self-confidence and sense of competence. According to some of the participants, this "therapeutic" dimension of their role was more important for their success as PEs than any course content that they conveyed.

PEs faced several other challenges. It was difficult and at times, overwhelming, when students' psychological issues became prominent during instructional sessions. PEs appeared to be unsure about how to address emotional distress and difficult personality styles when these features emerged in their interactions with students. Recent research suggest that mental health issues are becoming increasingly common in the university population with up to half of U.S. students meeting criteria for a mental health condition at some point in their college career (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013).

In some instances, PEs suggested that being peers with service recipients made it more difficult to be appropriately assertive. The participants seemed uncomfortable with having to set limits with fellow students. On occasion, PEs attempted to meet requests that they viewed as simultaneously impossible and inappropriate. As noted in the Introduction, the "built in" status hierarchy between an undergraduate student and a graduate teaching assistant is absent in the PE model. In their narrative account of difficult encounters, PEs indicated that periodically it was necessary to "pull rank" and assertively define their role.

Despite the challenges, PEs found their role as educators to be very satisfying and personally rewarding. Consistent with previous research, they described improved interpersonal and communication skills, development of leadership abilities and a stronger knowledge base.

Cognitively, PEs indicated that the role improved their metacognitive skills. This greater cognitive sophistication appeared to arise from two challenges—developing an understanding of professors' teaching styles and having to teach course material to learners with varying backgrounds with the corresponding need to adapt their explanatory style to the learner's cognitive framework.

PEs developed the ability to examine a professor's instructional style and describe the pedagogical approaches employed by diverse faculty members. This challenge was particularly prominent when the PE was assisting students with a course taught by an instructor with whom they were unfamiliar. At least one of the respondents indicated that "figuring out the professor" was similar to a difficult puzzle—it required examining the situation from multiple perspectives before they could see the overall instructional pattern.

PEs consistently reported that the frequent challenge of repeatedly explain course material from various perspectives, addressing students' questions and generating relevant examples to illustrate key concepts, increased both the depth and the complexity of their knowledge. As a result of this level of immersion in their major field of study, PEs became "deep learners" (Hermida, 2015). This deep learning was characterized by the ability to see connections between courses in their field of study as well as to place their major coursework in the context of differing disciplines and applications.

In their instructional guide for PEs, Newton and Ender (2010) emphasize the importance of self-awareness. Through their reflective comments, the PEs in the current study consistently demonstrated self-knowledge but also indicated that serving in this role had improved their self-awareness. The degree of personal satisfaction and meaning that the PEs found in their roles was noteworthy. Several participants indicated that the satisfaction that they experienced was such that they would actually continue in their role without being paid.

PEs' accounts of particularly successful encounters typically included helping a struggling, demoralized student to succeed both in performing well on exams but also in genuinely understanding course content. These successes were extremely rewarding—particularly when the students overtly recognized PEs' contribution to their achievement.

The current findings lead to two recommendations. The issue of stigma associated with being a recipient of academic support services should be addressed. The participants suggested several possible strategies to making receipt of academic support services more acceptable. Portraying academic support services as a means to excellence rather than a “last resort” for failing students may change campus perceptions. Additionally, designing and characterizing the Learning Center as a supportive and pleasant setting for homework completion, studying and writing papers for all students, not just those requiring assistance, may “normalize” the academic support center.

Second, given the high prevalence of mental health problems in the university population and PEs' expressed discomfort with responding to these issues, additional focused training may be helpful. In particular for PEs who work 1:1 with students in roles such as tutoring and mentoring, training should include attention to how to respond to students whose psychological issues are impacting the teaching-learning encounter. While providing formal psychotherapy or counseling is well beyond the scope of PEs' responsibilities, basic “micro counseling” skills (Ivey, 1971) have been successfully taught to paraprofessionals (Poorman, 2003). Training should also include the process of making a successful referral to the university counseling center.

In conclusion, the PEs interviewed in the current study embraced their role enthusiastically and with a genuine desire to provide the best academic assistance possible. When asked if they would recommend being a PE to friend, they were unhesitatingly unanimous in their agreement that they would encourage qualified peers to take on this role. Baxter-Magolda (2001) describes “self authorship” as one of the primary outcomes of higher education. For emerging adults, service learning can be a powerful tool for creating this secure identity characterized by a synthesis of cognitive complexity, interpersonal sensitivity and responsible maturity. These outcomes do appear to be particularly prominent among the PEs participating in the current study.

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