Continuing Professional Development Series No 4

Supporting the First Year Experience

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generic centre
Learning and Teaching Support Network

Continuing Professional Development Series

Welcome to the LTSN Generic Centre's Continuing Professional Development Series.

Continuing	because learning never ceases, regardless of age or seniority
Professional	because it is focused on personal competence in a professional role
Development	because its goal is to improve personal performance and enhance career progression

(Institute of Personnel and Development, 1997)

The Dearing Report stated that only with a strong investment in CPD can effective learning, teaching and assessment truly be developed. This series builds on that recommendation.

Action Learning

Mentoring

Supporting Portfolio Development

Supporting the First Year Experience

Supporting Student Retention

Critical Encounters: Scholarly Approaches to Learning and Teaching

This series is based on practical case studies taken from and easily applicable to, a range of contexts in higher education. The guides will be of use to colleagues involved in learning and teaching in higher education especially to staff and educational developers, and leaders of programmes that support new staff. The varied nature of the topics addressed enables the series to cater for a variety of needs.

Applications include
- mechanisms for supporting new and existing members of staff
- discussion foci for use within departments, schools and faculties
- strategies for tackling student retention
- models of developing the curriculum to widen access
- approaches to enhance the scholarship of learning and teaching.

The series editors are grateful to colleagues in LTSN Subject Centres and other senior colleagues who refereed this series, and of course to the authors for enabling its publication.

We hope that you will find these guides interesting and thought provoking. We welcome your feedback and any suggestions you may have for future work in this area.

Professor Brenda Smith
Head, LTSN Generic Centre

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Introduction

Supporting the first year experience is a key factor in retaining students, and is crucial for the student who is 'under prepared'. Retention issues are central to the discussion. However this briefing stresses that retention should not be the primary aim: it should be an intended outcome of well-designed policy and practice that has student success and satisfaction as the primary goal. The second part of this paper includes an example of a successful Peer Tutoring practice initiative which is designed to support students' learning during their first year at university. It also deals with the issues of retention in which the main elements may be characterised as student preparedness and learner autonomy.

Context

In a climate of reduced budgets, increasing competition for resources and students, and the demand for accountability, universities that put their students first will thrive. Student retention is a performance indicator for assessing the success of a student and, therefore, of an institution. The way to increase retention is to work towards policies and practices that have student success and satisfaction as their central theme. When values and processes of learning are placed at the centre of a university, conditions can then be established for all individuals to develop their full potential. It should enable students to take control of their lives and to realise their responsibilities as learners, workers and citizens.

Background

One of the outcomes of the Education and Employment Committee's fourth report (of the session 2001-2 on Higher Education: Access), was the extent to which a student's experience of Higher Education is affected by finance and other pressures. This has implications for retention and attrition. The sixth Select Committee report on Higher Education: Retention (March 2001) was intended to contribute to further debate and to ensure that access to higher education, student financial support and other key issues are considered in context.

Access to higher education is not only a matter of getting in to university, it is also a matter of staying in and emerging in good standing.
(Select Committee Education and Employment sixth report, 2001.)

This enquiry had, as its starting point, the quality of the student experience after ten years of progress in developing a mass higher education system. It considered increased participation with the aim of fifty per cent of 18-30 year olds attending higher education. However, a key point in the report is the analysis of non-completion. This is most marked in those institutions that admit the highest proportion of 'non- traditional' students. These universities now have the biggest challenge, and it could be argued they should receive better resources to achieve the goals of widening participation.

Yorke (HEFCE, 1997) identified the following six factors that effect students' decisions to withdraw from their course:

1. Poor quality of the student experience
2. Inability to cope with the demands of Higher Education
3. Unhappiness with the social environment
4. Wrong choice of programme
5. Matters related to financial need
6. Dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision.

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How and what the University needs to learn

The success of an institution and the success of its students are inseparable. (Noel and Levitz 1991a)

A learning university needs to be open to new ideas, listening, reflecting, enquiring into solutions to new problems, co-operating in the practice of change and then critically reviewing it. Many variables affect retention, and most fundamental is what happens in the first year. Solving these problems involves the whole university. Teaching on a first year programme may lack status, particularly as research interests correlate more with the teaching of postgraduate students. Higher Education is now a consumer-led economy and students will shop around for the institutions and the courses that best cater for their needs. They will continually search for a 'better deal', believing in their right to change their mind about the courses they study. There is a very narrow threshold where students test the institutional sincerity. It seems that students make up their minds in the first four to six weeks about whether they will stay and 'give it a go', or whether to seek another course or even pursue paid employment.

The first six weeks on campus are the most important and critical in determining whether the student is going to stay or leave. To get students to stay, you must get them started right. (Noel and Levitz 1999a)

It can take only one critical incident for a student to judge the quality of service on offer. Age, ethnicity, gender, teaching and learning styles of staff may differ – in some cases considerably – from those whom they teach. We often embrace retention practices as a result of a recruitment crisis or a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) visit, but we need to do more to put students at the centre and to respond to their concerns. Managing retention requires us to enhance our programmes and services and hence student learning. When tutors help students to reflect on their prior learning as well as focusing them on their futures, they can develop motivation and become more involved in their own learning.

Retention of students needs a multifaceted approach. This can include how students are recruited, the design of induction programmes, the extent to which resources are 'front loaded' into the first year experience, and the quality of the guidance, support and teaching provided. This support needs to start from the first point of contact with the university and to continue through all stages of learning as well as after exit and beyond.

To make the first year student connection, institutions must adopt the concept of 'front loading', putting the strongest, most student centred people, programmes and services during the first year (Noel, Levitz and Saluri 1985).

The following table, which has been developed from ideas by Gardner, highlights the essential themes for success and gives suggestions for turning these into practice.

Figure 1: developed from the work of J.N. Gardner (Upcraft, M.L. and Gardner, J.N. 1989)

	Essential themes for success	Suggestions
1	Discussing what we mean by 'first year success'.	Understanding how that has been defined in the past. Discussing ideas that define what a student needs to do, experience and learn, and how to carry their survival skills into the next year.
2	Designing training programmes that introduce the language and ethos of retention, linking with institutional goals and mission.	Looking for ways in which these sessions could be included within existing programmes to support new and inexperienced staff.
3	Guaranteeing guidance from peers, mentors, and support services	Effective liaison between support services and academic initiatives that are designed to support and guide, e.g. Peer Tutoring.
4	Setting clear and specific goals for the first year and devising strategies to help first years achieve those goals.	Designing an appropriate first year curriculum.
5	Identifying those things that are both internal and external to the curriculum that interfere with student success.	Developing a good range of student feedback strategies, both on the course and during institutional evaluations.
6	Devising systems that help you spot the early warning signs of students at risk.	Developing diagnostic tools to spot students at risk.
7	Helping students enter into the approaches to learning that will help them succeed.	Consistent approaches from all those that support the first year student in their learning.
8	Checking out assumptions by looking at the first year through the eyes of a student.	Providing regular feedback opportunities both in and out of class.
9	Front-loading essential institutional resources.	Ensuring the majority of resources are directed towards year one.
10	Ensuring that if you market a 'strong' programme for the first year, you actually deliver it.	Effective communication and relationship with the marketing department. Ensuring accurate information.
11	Addressing students' expectations.	Find ways of identifying and understanding students' expectations though focus groups.
12	Listening to student concerns.	Use of student membership in the committee structure.
13	Creating support groups.	Peer Tutoring Programmes Societies Mentoring initiatives

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Issues to consider

Much of effective retention practice is concerned with what should be done at Institutional level. The following section offers some possible solutions.

Understanding expectations

The Select Committee on Retention (Sixth Report) notes that a major cause of non-completion was the mismatch between students' expectations of higher education and their actual experiences when studying.

There are expectations and perceptions of university life by both students and the academic community alike, but we have to guard against the possibility of limiting their expectations by our own attitudes and practices. Student experience starts outside the university when selection and choices are first made. Perceptions can change rapidly when the reality does not meet the expectation. For example, receiving poor feedback on the first piece of assessed work, or maybe even no feedback on the first assessment, does little for the students' motivation. End of modules, work placements and end of semesters are all points where we know there are pressures and consequently are times that can give rise to stress. If we know this, then good support strategies need to be developed and applied proactively.

Understanding what students are thinking and how they are feeling is the first step to getting retention results. (Noel and Levitz (1999b)

Defining the teacher role – we might need to change the way we do things

As a process, learning is more effective when students and teachers engage in an effective partnership of mutual trust and collaboration. As a result of what we learn, our role may need to develop and change. We need to foster potential and to realise the personal qualities and capacities of each individual, then we will need to guide and mentor as well as explaining, informing and demonstrating.

Learning is based on discovery guided by mentoring rather than on the transmission of information...academics can learn from students as students are learning from academics. (Boyer Commission, 1995)

Not only does this quote emphasise the learning partnership between teacher and student, but the need to rethink the first year experience. Roles should be explicit and all communications should be clear. When guiding learners to discover principles by themselves, we need to actively engage the student in a dialogue. Learning then becomes a conversation in which both the agenda of the teacher and that of the learner are explicit.

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Selecting the methodologies to support the student and the teacher

By providing flexible courses through well-designed curricula, the institution can demonstrate that it is responding and adapting to change. It is essential that ways are found to review and monitor approaches and practices; that strategies are identified which support both tutor and student; and that learning opportunities are flexible both in terms of the mode of study and by recognising and rewarding prior learning.

Helping students to become critical thinkers is one way is which they can be encouraged to reflect on their experience. This can be quite daunting when contemplating new subjects and differing expectations. The skill of listening empathetically as the student explores in this way is therefore essential. It is important to identify assumptions underlying student behaviours, choices and decisions, and where appropriate, to help them understand that certain aspects of their situation can be changed.

Guiding and supporting is a learning process for all. The student gains a better understanding of himself or herself and the educator learns more about their learning needs. It follows then, that those students who are better prepared, who know how to ask for help, and who use the support opportunities are more likely to complete their courses. However, with the increasing diversity of students, institutions may need

to look more closely at the support services they provide and consider whether they meet students' needs.

Guidance can improve the student experience by ensuring that students are placed on programmes as close to their interests, commitments and abilities as possible. Guidance also encourages students to take control of their future direction and can end feelings of isolation and marginalisation (HEQC 1994).

The guidance role involves all those who come in contact with the student body such as administrators, technical staff, learning support staff and academics. This enables the tracking of students through close observation of the process of progress and the proactive ways that monitor the quality of the learning environment. This then allows for support and guidance to be offered at the appropriate times and encourages students to develop confidence and autonomy.

The next section gives an example of a peer tutoring scheme that has been running for thirteen years in a number of British universities. The main achievement has been increased student success due to the collaborative partnership between teaching staff and student leaders who support the first year experience.

Case study

Supplemental Instruction (SI): A peer tutoring programme for students – London Metropolitan University

This case study looks at a curriculum support programme that uses the notions of developing independent learners, while developing the skills of enquiry and critical thinking. It is usually attached to high risk or historically difficult courses (and is therefore not remedial). It is an example of peer tutoring, and highlights the fact that students can be guided and supported by each other. Usually, second year students act as the leaders of small groups of first years. Second year students can still remember how it feels to be new to the University. The second year student leaders are primarily engaged in passing on their experience rather than re-teaching the subject.

The success of this programme can be due to:

• being driven by the content of the course
• well trained and committed student leaders
• academic staff who are keen to receive feedback on how students are responding to their courses.

Theoretical underpinnings

The SI programme draws strongly on two theoretical frameworks of cognitive development. Piaget believed that co-operation between peers is likely to encourage real exchange of thought and discussion. He stressed the value of the cognitive conflict that multiple perspectives can bring, and deemed co-operation essential for the development of a critical attitude of mind, objectivity and discursive reflection. Vygotsky (1962) cited in Falchicov (2001) argued that the range of skills that can develop with peer collaboration is greater than anything that can be used alone.

Supporting students to become more efficient learners

SI encourages students to think about their learning. This can include identifying what they already know and examining the processes of knowing, understanding and reasoning. This approach allows for managing the 'how, when, where, and why' in learning, which is particularly important in the preparation for carrying out complex cognitive activities. The SI sessions offer a structured experience that enables critical and realistic reflection on what students are doing, and why they should be doing it.

History

The programme is known as Supplemental Instruction (SI) and was originally developed in the United States of America at the University of Missouri, Kansas City in 1975. Their first concern was the very resource intensive one-to-one method of supporting students who were finding difficulty with their course. There seemed to be no conclusive evidence that the approach of separating out study skill support from course content was successful. This is a similar position to that taken by the supporters of critical thinking who affirm that general critical thinking skills cannot be developed in isolation from a specific context. Therefore a programme was needed to integrate learning strategies into course content.

A second major concern was a high attrition rate of first year students. Educators acknowledged that they needed to look at ways of motivating students and bringing them back into their studies. An initiative was needed to combat attrition and define a range of retention strategies that had as an outcome, improved student success.

One of the strategies developed was the identification of 'difficult courses'. This insight acknowledged that historically there have always been 'difficult courses', e.g. ones that deal with abstract concepts, or courses like Law and Medicine where facts have to be memorised, or courses with a maths basis, which were then defined as 'high risk'. This was a move away from the notion that all problems of attrition are located in or around a student's circumstances. It should then follow that we would expect that some students would find aspects of their courses difficult and as a consequence might fail. If we know this, why are we not putting a high level of resources into these areas? As the first premise, this approach takes the focus away from the student and puts responsibility firmly with educators to identify difficulties and to ensure that the resources and the curriculum are responsive to student need. This enables a proactive approach, as planning can be done early on and difficulties can be dealt with before they turn into failure rates. SI tries to dispel the notion that it is a 'quick fix'. SI underpins and supports current good practice. It should however be one of a number of learning support methods on offer.

Developments of the model in the UK

It is worth remembering that the SI approach is not new. Children have always helped other children in the classroom (Topping 1988). Monitors were used in Elizabethan grammar schools, and Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster in the late 18th century and early 19th century used children to tutor, with a view to educating both the tutors and the tutees (Goodlad 1979). Many students now arrive at university having experienced mentoring programmes, or having been involved with voluntary projects that share some of the same principles.

SI has been used in the UK for the past 13 years. Many universities have developed the original model to fit in with their particular culture and subject areas. It is based on the premise that all learning is student-centred and is an active process fully involving the learner, with close collaboration with those who teach and support learning. It is a true partnership that supports all involved.

The partnership has four main players who aim to benefit:
- *individual students* by helping them to build up their confidence and self-esteem. This develops their ability to master course concepts as well as study and cognitive skills.

- *student leaders* by giving them an opportunity to develop a range of skills including group, team leadership and communication skills. These skills can apply to other situations thus developing understanding of their own subject areas.

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- ***academic staff*** involved in SI by giving them regular feedback on how their course content is being received by the learner (through regular feedback from the nominated student leader).

- ***the institution.*** It becomes possible to target 'difficult courses' and to provide practical support for staff and students. The scheme helps to improve student performance and success across the ability range and can do more than simply reduce 'failure' rates. It has the potential to break down barriers between year groups and to develop an effective and successful learning community.

The centre for Supplemental Instruction UK is based at the London Metropolitan University, which offers training and research into this model and other retention strategies that support the first year learner. The centre works closely with the United States and South Africa, sharing data and ideas for furthering better practice. Jenni Wallace is the UK SI Certified Trainer. The SI centre encourages universities in the UK (after they have received their training) to develop the model further, to experiment and to share the outcomes with other practitioners. One of the first things that usually occurs is a change of name from 'SI' while nevertheless agreeing to attribute any published work to SI. For example, at University College London, Kingston University and Bournemouth University SI is known as PAL (Peer Assisted Learning). At London Metropolitan and Manchester University, SI is known as PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support). On the other hand, Sussex and Surrey Institute of Art and Design University College have kept with SI.

Key features of the SI model

- It equips students with the skills of academic enquiry, ownership of learning and the building of self-confidence.

- It is designed to encourage empowerment of learners enabling them to become independent in their learning.

- It recognises that problems are often inherent in the courses themselves rather than in the students that take those courses. It therefore targets high-risk courses and not high-risk students. It is effective not only at reducing failure rates, but also improving performance across the board. The effects are demonstrably transferable to other courses that the students take.

- It not only helps students' learning in the managed SI groups but is of great value to the student leaders who are carefully trained in the processes of group facilitation (not 'teaching').

- SI is a group-work based activity that allows for the modelling of successful learning strategies by the leader or any of the group members.

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- It is based on several years of carrying out extensive student evaluation work, which has consistently highlighted student concerns about learning strategies and the need for feedback in the learning process.

- SI is designed to embed learning strategies and study skills into course content, not to encourage the learning of the 'subject' in isolation. This is achieved by a process of collaboration and co-operation amongst learners, by a system of supporting course tutors who invite the programme into their curriculum area and by training students to deliver part of this peer-tutoring programme as group facilitators.

- SI provides discreet support to practice a subject and is a safe place for students to discuss and process course material and openly admit their difficulties. They are encouraged to 'have a go', and not to worry about making mistakes. They learn that effective learning can mean co-operative learning, rather than isolated competition. The programme is also valuable in breaking down barriers between year groups.

- It can provide for successful transfer of skills which improves all-round performance. Results have shown that the scheme offers opportunities for influencing institutional change, especially the re-design of the first year.

Setting up the model, key features to have in place

The key players and their roles

The SI Co-ordinators are the people who most support the project in their institution. They might have a management or academic function with particular responsibility for a year group (usually first years) or a subject area. The SI Co-ordinator might also be from a central service such as an Academic Development Unit and is responsible for identifying targeted courses, gaining support from the faculty, department, or school and from individual staff.

SI is offered where the academic tutor invites and supports the programme and is looking at how he or she can develop other ways of collecting feedback from their students. The academic and/or the co-ordinator together select and screen potential SI leaders for 'content competence' (a good understanding of the core principles relating to the subject selected to be supported by SI) and recommend that they go forward for training. SI Co-ordinators are interested in student feedback and trying out new ways of engaging students in the partnership of learning. The Co-ordinator is also responsible for managing the SI programmes throughout the year, for the monitoring and evaluation of the programme, and for generally raising the profile of the project within their own institution.

There is also provision for Co-ordinators to meet with each other to compare experience, practice, and data through a National SI Network. All of the Co-ordinators take part in the two-day training session with student leaders which provides an opportunity for students and academic staff to share in the goals of the programme.

Student feedback mechanism for academic teams

The SI student leader is expected to provide feedback to the member of academic staff who is responsible for the course. This partnership approach gives the student focussed support regarding content issues, and the academic is kept in touch with the real learning needs of their group. Feedback can include matters such as the pace of the course, understanding of what is being said, and the relevance of support materials. The student will be trained in the delicate art of negotiation skills during supervision sessions, for it takes skill (and courage!) for a student to liaise effectively with a member of academic staff.

Supervision

The SI Co-ordinator would normally meet with their student mentors on a weekly basis at the beginning of the term and then perhaps fortnightly as the student leaders gain more confidence. This supervision is critical to the success of the project.

The Co-ordinator needs to monitor students' fitness to practice as facilitators, and to check that they are not re-teaching the material. As well as being part of the ongoing training in the skills needed by student mentors, it emphasises the importance of review and continuous development and gives an assurance that they need never feel isolated.

The meetings are an opportunity to discuss content of the sessions. These group meetings are run like an SI session. Everyone takes part by listening, offering solutions and sharing good practice. They are an opportunity to step back from a problem, and with the help of the group, look at the student needs of the group and set realistic plans for achieving what they want. The Co-ordinator while managing the supervision group is modelling the skills of group learning, which feeds into the continuous skills training of the student leaders. The meetings encourage students to plan ahead, to anticipate likely outcomes and consequences, and to work out how they might respond when things occur. It encourages the search for a wider context and fuller meaning. Also, the Co-ordinator is able to get feedback about the overall success of the SI programme in relation to specific curriculum issues.

Student leaders and how they are selected

The SI leader, usually a second year student who has been deemed course competent and has been approved by the course tutor, is often seen as the 'Real Winner' (Gardener 1994) within this project for it is the student leader who develops a wide range of skills. The selection process usually begins with a staff member introducing and describing the SI process. They also explain the time commitment involved in becoming a student leader. (A past student who has undertaken this role can be a true advocate for the project and help to ensure a student perspective.) The prospective leaders are then invited to think about whether they would like to volunteer and go forward for training. Where there are too many volunteers, there can be individual interviews.   The interview questions are designed to test subject competence (not expertise) and whether the student can demonstrate some 'passion' for the subject, combined with a good reason for wanting to be a leader.

The reason most students choose to do this falls into one of the following four categories:
- a genuine desire to help other students
- experience that can be included on a C.V.
- an opportunity to build up self confidence
- a chance to revise the subject.

The staff member making the selection is not particularly looking for a 'high flyer' but rather for a student who at some time in his or her learning history identified a problem with the effectiveness of their learning, and found that they developed strategies for overcoming them. It is often these students who volunteer because they feel strongly that they want to share their experience with others. This is borne out in other research and is described as 'genuine interest in developing others' (Conway 1994).

Features to look for in a student leader:

- Interested in other people
- Able to facilitate a group without dominating
- Interested in discussing others' ideas; able to hear, listen and extract ideas
- Able to exchange skills, acknowledging that they are learners too
- Able and willing to give time to the group and be objective about group issues
- Ready to share concerns with other leaders and members of staff
- Open, inspiring trust and maintaining confidentiality
- Encouraging, thus helping students to value their own work and development
- Focussed in approach, sharing clear aims, goals or objectives
- Able to inspire confidence
- Foster methods that deserve respect, but not demanding respect
- Able to guide students effectively through the bureaucracy maze.

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The training of the SI leaders

The session is designed to enable students to reflect on their own learning and to understand that not all the students they meet will be learning in the same way as themselves.

- The session starts with a conversation about the learning journeys of participants in the group, sharing their experiences with one another and each identifying why they are taking part in the programme.

- The training models the approaches that student leaders are to use and introduces the language and concepts used when describing learning. Students often report that this session has been instrumental in helping them draw together the threads of their own experiences, to make sense of these, and to apply what they are learning to a current problem.

- Students then apply learning theory to some of their past experiences and compare the differences in preferred learning styles.

- This is followed by training in pro-active learning and study strategies, and interpersonal, team and group handling skills.

- The emphasis on the use of facilitation skills and not re-teaching is made very clear to students in training.   Students acknowledge that they are not able to teach the subject that they are supporting, but learn that they can facilitate a learning session for others by leading them through a structured event that enables exploration and practice of course content with the integration of learning strategies.

- They learn that making mistakes is part of learning, and that letting students try ideas out in a supportive group environment rather than in isolation is all part of the experience necessary to take control of their learning.

- At all times they are asked to consider themselves as 'model students' by modelling behaviours that lead to successful learning.

- The second part of the training is based on a range of role plays designed to enable the exploration of methods and techniques necessary for leading a group to achieve a better understanding of the taught material.

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The SI sessions

- The SI group session takes place at a regular time and in the same place each week with the student leader taking full responsibility for the publicity of the sessions.

- The student leader facilitates. He or she does not teach, but encourages the group to solve their own difficulties from their own group resources.

- Student leaders start by negotiating the agenda and content of the session with the group of students who attend. Alternatively, a member of staff might provide examples for the session. Once agreed, leaders have responsibility for keeping the group focussed on the task, to call attention to the main ideas of the discussion so that the learning is focussed, and to promote the acceptance of each person's contribution.

- Students draw on their own notes, course handouts, assessment materials and the recommended texts.

- The leader prompts the group members to explore how they learn as much as what they learn. This shows the value of processing information in contrast to memorising a session of facts.

- Leaders model the thinking of a successful student. By demonstrating their thinking out loud, and verbalising the process of problem solving specific to the material of the course, they help the first year students see that making sense of new ideas and forming concepts does not happen by magic.

- If the group is unable to progress, because there is not the knowledge within the group, it is up to the leader to take the discussion into how the information can be sought outside of the group, for example by referring to someone who knows, like the course tutor, librarian and help desk. This demonstrates how students can access information and solve their own problems.

- Through modelling a problem solving method, student leaders demonstrate that self-confidence comes from trying, failing, learning from mistakes and trying again. They model constructive behaviour and the attitudes that the students in their group wish to achieve. Observing others use specific competencies to solve problems and to relate more effectively to others can lead to considerable reflection and alternative ways of achieving a goal (Johnson, D. and Johnson, P. 1991).

What student leaders can achieve as a result of training and practice with groups

- Helping students feel good about what they have already achieved

- Helping them to keep to deadlines and schedules

- Helping students examine why they may be stuck as regards their learning development

- 'Knowing someone who can' when they cannot offer direct help themselves; re-directing and referral

- Giving informal feedback on work the first years are doing as this provides a useful 'first reaction' to their work

- Helping them to get the most out of feedback and advice from staff and other students

- Simply by asking 'how is it going'? (The fact that someone asks this is a powerful motivator. Students do not want to have to reply, 'Well, nothing much is happening at present'.)

- When helping first year students to maintain their 'need to achieve', leaders can remind them that 'a problem is only a problem until you know how to solve it' and so on

- Cultivating a feeling of 'go on – you can do it', 'you're not on your own', and that 'there is at least someone rooting for you'

- Able to engender mutual respect within the group.

Some universities offer credit for the student leader role

Measuring the quality

Collecting feedback from students and staff – some qualitative data

Feedback from student leaders

The student leader is central to the SI initiative and listens to what students are asking for in their learning. This student feedback has really helped with the fine-tuning of developments here in the U.K. The following quotes from student leaders demonstrate that students, once given the responsibility, can contribute to a learning community.

- *One step taken by the staff introducing SI to our course, which helped ensure a lot of initial interest, was the polling of the class as to what subjects they felt that they would most like SI to cover. The response was very much as the second years predicted when asked, but surprised some of the staff. This helped reinforce the feeling that the second years were more in touch with the problems of the first years. Not surprisingly the two topics that came out on top were both mathematically orientated and involved a lot of problem solving.*

- *This experience was nice in the first week as it helped me to see that I could help students save time struggling with simple problems that I had wasted time on in my own exam preparation. Also the students could see from this that I*

understood at least some of their problems and maybe they could see ways of using me to gain the most for themselves.

- *The less confident students were not quiet for long. A talking point for everyone, and of great interest, were the varied backgrounds of the students. The competitive atmosphere was somewhat relieved on realising, as regards the course overall, that what was a piece of cake for one student was a painful nightmare for another.*

- *In SI nothing is lost in sharing knowledge with fellow students. The ability to orally communicate ideas (especially mathematically orientated material) was highlighted and related to areas of the course work such as project presentation, business orals and laboratory orals.*

- *Simple things such as giving students uninterrupted flow in their explanations and avoiding rephrasing increased involvement. The stating of our relationship to students was of major importance. We (the peers) were not lecturers, nor would we lecture. We were to be seen as fellow students with a year's experience and as allies. This avoided possible unpleasantness of lecturer-peer conflict. We were to avoid the appearance of setting ourselves up as better lecturers.*

Feedback from staff

- *The 'power-gap' that exists between staff members and students is avoided. The more informal the environment the happier the students will be to relate difficulties they have with the course.*

- *Even if the teaching is very good students do not get 100% – there is always room for improvement for students of all levels of ability.*

- *The crucial difference is that teaching also involves the introduction of new facts, ideas, concepts, their explanation, and connections made – it is a moving on. SI facilitates consolidation, practice, clarification, and revision and is looking back. It is true that this is the process that is important with the students themselves providing the content. Theoretically, an excellent SI leader could facilitate any subject, but that does not mean they could teach any subject.*

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Jenni Wallace

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