

An Experiential Learning Project with ITE Students

Peer Learning and Coaching

by Sally Low, Institute of Technical Education College East (Simei), Singapore (Sally_Low@ite.edu.sg)

This short paper is based on my personal reflections and observations of a project in peer tutoring and coaching done in 2002. After briefly describing the project, I shared how student leaders and peer learners perceived their experience in this project. Finally, I offered my own thoughts on this learning method and made a few recommendations on how to overcome actual and/or potential limitations as regards the use of this method in our teaching.

■ Introduction

I would like to share some thoughts on peer coaching or tutoring. I am amazed at the enormous potential we can tap from students, especially in the area of peer learning and coaching.

I was asked to try out a peer tutoring project several years ago in ITE College West, Clementi, Singapore to find out whether students from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) can in fact be peer tutors or coaches to their fellow classmates or friends. This project was to harness students' capability as a co-facilitator or assistant teacher in class. I was asked to select one of my classes to carry out this peer tutoring project. If successfully carried out, other teachers might be asked to implement similar projects.

The procedures for this engagement were simple. I was asked to:

1. select five student leaders who had good grades in the past and who had the ability to communicate well with their peers;
2. train and brief them in the subject areas or topics for teaching their peers in class;
3. place them in groups whose members they were familiar with (one leader with a group of 5 members); and
4. allow them to coach their fellow classmates in that group setting for the next few lessons very much like a tutor, while the teacher took on the role of the administrator in providing support in the form of printed notes and other materials, besides helping to re arrange the chairs and tables.

The process was carried out in a series of half-hour programmes over the next few lessons until the topic or subject area was completely covered. At the end of the three weeks, both the student leaders and those they coached were asked to give their feedback for improvement as well as the benefits gained from such a project.

■ Feedback from Student Leaders

1. *Gained better understanding of the topics.* They felt that peer tutoring gave them a better understanding of the subject or topic itself as they were first taught the lessons, and then went through the same lessons many times with their fellow classmates, thus making them very familiar in the subject area and content of the topics they went covered.
2. *Confidence boosted.* The leaders felt a sense of achievement in being able to do as well as their teacher could in teaching their peers. One student leader even commented that teaching per se was not difficult, and that it was the part on motivating the students to learn that was tough!
3. *Needed more time to plan and prepare the lessons.* They also felt that they should be given more time to prepare the lessons instead of merely two weeks before the actual lesson. One leader actually prepared powerpoint slides to make his lesson more interesting while the others used one-to-one coaching as their mode of delivery.
4. *Felt peer tutoring could be extended to other modules.* The leaders proposed that the mode of peer tutoring be adopted for learning other courses or subjects, especially Life Skills modules such as Motivation, Self esteem, and Adversity. This was because both leaders and peers could then share their experiences with one another and do some research as a class together.

■ Feedback from Peer Learners

1. *It was a good learning experience.* In the class of 30 students, 25 of them felt that it was a good experience to have their peers teaching and guiding them in a classroom setting "without the teacher".
2. *The mood was good: everyone was relaxed.* 29 out of the 30 learners enjoyed the lessons as they felt the mood was not tense because their leaders did not comment adversely on any mistake or error made.

3. *Learners were motivated to discuss the topics.* 25 out of the 30 learners were more vocal, asking more questions and clearing their doubts faster, than when they had teachers teaching them.
4. *The sessions were interactive and participative.* They were very participative and interactive as there were no obstacles since they were all peers.

■ Positive Thoughts on this Learning Method

At first I was apprehensive when I had to “try out” this task as I had doubts about my students’ capability. However, throughout the learning journey of about 3 weeks, I realized that they could do a good job. The student leaders were very excited about their role and were keen to learn the content well so that they could “teach” their peers.

I learned that by giving verbal cues and hand gestures such as patting them on their backs when their peers responded well, or giving nods and smiles to the leaders as well as providing audio-visual aids and materials when these things were needed, the five student leaders were transformed into “real teachers”. They made very competent trainers!

As an incentive, I gave the student leaders good grades for doing well in this assignment. What touched me most was that this particular class became even more cohesive and more enthusiastic in other subjects as well. The student leaders scored well in this subject because, like the “Hawthorne Effect”, they became more productive and motivated.

I was very gratified when the student leaders came to discuss with me other possible areas of involvement, to make their school life even more exciting and fulfilling!

■ Limitations of Peer Tutoring

Indeed, peer tutoring is a good learning method when administered with care and trust. However, there were some limitations to this project. The following are some guidelines I followed and the limitations I faced in this project:

1. The ground rules have to be clearly spelt out at the beginning of the programme.
2. Students must be prepared (mentally, physically and emotionally) that they would be taught solely by their classmates in a formal setting.
3. Student discipline in learning is vital for this method to be successfully carried out. Teacher’s intervention must be kept to a minimum.
4. The noise level is another area needing a certain amount of control as the learners tend to get excited and end up discussing the lessons loudly, particularly when they have questions to ask. However, this can be solved by encouraging the students to write down their questions.
5. The topics to be covered have to be manageable for the student leaders to understand them first. In this respect, only soft-skills can be shared in this manner. Subjects such as Engineering, Mathematics, Accounting and other technical subjects may be too difficult for the student leaders to handle.
6. Teachers themselves must be willing to empower and entrust the student leaders with the authority for peer coaching and tutoring. Many colleagues chose not to participate in this project because they were afraid of losing control of the students. Many teachers were also not keen to do this as they felt that it would be very time consuming, and thus might affect the coverage of other curriculum or content.

On reflection, I feel that it is still good to give students a chance to realize their potential as a facilitator, coach or teacher. This may help in their future career.