Using Action Research to Implement and Evaluate Peer Learning in Marketing courses: Engaging Students Through Self-Learning

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Abstract

Peer Learning (PL) has been used in several academic disciplines, including IT (Chen, 2002; Goode & Teh, 2005; Kjellin & Stenfors, 2003), anatomy (Pandey & Magin, 2003) and management (Gordon & Connor, 2001; Hogan, 1999; Stansfield, 1997). However, there has been no substantive research on Peer Learning usage within a marketing course. To rectify this gap in the literature, this study reports on the use of Peer Learning across two graduate level marketing courses, using an action research design. The paper compares results in the marketing field to the results found in Hogan's (1999) results in the management field. The concept of Peer Learning was implemented as a form of cooperative learning in the two marketing courses. Quantitative results showed that students from both courses improved their group work abilities along with various personal growth measures. Qualitative results showed that the strengths of Peer Learning involved improved learning, communication, cultural understanding and group work skills, with weaknesses being time pressure and interpersonal differences. The results extend those of Hogan (1999).

Introduction

Students at university have always used their social groups as a form of support for their learning (Boud, 2001). These usually informal arrangements have been formalised with the concept of Peer Learning (PL) (sometimes referred to as Reciprocal Peer Learning (RPL)) (Boud, 2001). Peer Learning is a two-way, reciprocal learning activity that should be mutually beneficial and involves the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between participants (Boud, 2001; Cooper, 2002). Within university courses Peer Learning and associated paradigms have been utilised in the structured scientific disciplines of information systems (Chen, 2002; Goode & Teh, 2005; Kjellin & Stenfors, 2003), computer science (Wills, Deremer, McCauley, & Null, 1999), chemistry (Dalgety, Coll, & Jones, 2003) and anatomy (Pandey & Magin, 2003). There has been some interest in the process within the less structured field of management (Gordon & Connor, 2001; Hogan, 1999; Stansfield, 1997), though there has not been much use made of Peer Learning within the more concept-oriented discipline of marketing. As a means of addressing this deficit, this paper explores the use of a Peer Learning paradigm within a marketing course context, drawing on the approach of Hogan (1999) as inspiration.

Researchers have noted a difference between several types of learning, such as 'surface' versus 'deep' learning (Biggs &Telfer, 1987, as cited in Hogan, 1999) and the use of associative schemas (where students are actively involved in the material they are learning and form cognitive links between the areas covered) (Blowers, Ramsey, Merriman, & Grooms, 2003). Students who perform better in coursework tend to form these associative schemas independently. The motivation of Peer Learning is to move students from the superficial 'surface' learning (where learning is externally motivated and students usually use a lot of memorising and reproductive strategies, and associative schemas are not independently formed) to a 'deep'

learning, where learning is intrinsically motivated and students are more concerned with the meaning of the concepts (and students design their own associative schemas) (Hogan, 1999).

The Peer Learning process is an interdependent one, where each student is dependent on the others to enhance their own learning. Due to the reciprocal nature of Peer Learning, students must be active participants in the process to ensure its success (Falchikov, 2001). Peer Learning involves students working in groups (from pairs to larger groups of seven or eight) to share ideas, experiences and knowledge and to achieve a specific and mutually agreed upon goal (Boud, 2001). There are many different techniques used to foster Peer Learning in the classroom (or tutorial). These include peer tutoring, where students are paired up and one is assigned the role of tutor. There is some implied knowledge differential between the students, as would be seen in the traditional form of peer tutoring (Falchikov). This is similar to the idea of peer teaching, where students learn from teaching others. They may have been assigned a topic to study by the instructor prior to the class, as done by Hogan (1999) or they may take turns in teaching the textbook material (Falchikov).

Peer assessment and peer feedback are also intrinsic factors of the Peer Learning paradigm and involve students giving both formal and informal feedback to their peers (Falchikov, 2001; Keppell, Au, Ma, & Chan, 2006). Students can give other students marks (i.e. assess the other students' presentations or assignments) with a pre-agreed design for using these marks as the actual results for all students (or not, according to the individual instructor and cohort) (Keppell et al.). There is also the opportunity to gain feedback from many sources (i.e. numerous students) as opposed to only the single tutor as seen in traditional university courses (Pandey & Magin, 2003). There is also a social aspect to Peer Learning, with students working in teams, which prompted Wilkinson (2002) to describe Peer Learning as a social process with educational consequences. Many books exist to guide interested instructors in the use of Peer Learning within their own university courses (e.g. Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001a; Cohen & Sampson, 2001; Cooper, 2002). Hogan (1999) reports on the use of semi-autonomous study groups in an undergraduate management course run at Curtin University in Perth, Australia. Throughout the semester, students were required to work in groups of eight (meeting for one hour each week) to study the course content, with specific roles and responsibilities being outlined for each member. The role of facilitator was rotated among the students, with each student fulfilling the role once across the eight weeks of meetings. Hogan (1999) found that the students in their Peer Learning - designed course reported learning about group dynamics, appreciating diversity, autonomous learning and taking responsibility for self-motivation. However, students found the Peer Learning practices too time consuming.

This study takes into account the theoretical basis of Peer Learning and applies this teaching and learning method to two graduate level marketing courses. Action research will be used to determine whether Peer Learning, as used in the marketing field, produces comparable learning improvements as compared to the management field (see Hogan,1999).

Method

The two courses under investigation were post-graduate marketing courses and were conducted by two different lecturers, designated as Course A and Course B. Course A provides a strategic

marketing approach to product innovation and development. Course B is intended to be a capstone course. The study had an action research design, being a traditional Lewinian style where the intervention is an experimental manipulation designed to solve a problem and improve the social situation under investigation (Dickens & Watkins, 1999).

Course A

The concept of peer learning was introduced to the students through a lecture format, consisting of an introduction and outline concerning knowledge acquisition, skill development and personal growth attributes. Peer Learning was described as not just seeking knowledge acquisition as an educational outcome, but also advancement of skill development and personal growth. The main assessment item to use Peer Learning in this course involved researching a specific, marketing related topic and presenting the research findings. Students managed group selection and each group of four was allocated a journal article. Each member was to read that article plus one other article that held relevance to the given topic. In this manner each member brought individual blocks of information and contributed their knowledge to other group members. The collective knowledge from five articles formed the basis for a presentation to the class. In this manner students taught other group members as well as the student cohort of that class. Students in the audience used a formal marking criteria sheet to assess the presentations.

The main Peer Learning activity commenced in academic week three of the semester and continued on a weekly basis until the final week (week 13) and was worth 10% of the overall grade. This was in addition to a mid-semester exam (35%), case study report (15%), project report and oral presentation (25%) and a critique of the new product and its development process (15%).

Course B

The concept of peer learning was introduced as an aid to the students, to be used while completing a research paper in groups of three to four. A detailed discussion was conducted in the first week, along with written guidelines regarding the project. It was particularly emphasised how it was necessary for students to engage in their understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses in conceptualising, researching and writing, and to make contributions in an equitable way according to their personal abilities and attributes. Students were encouraged to recognise each other's skills and pool their talents, while the principles of cooperation and division of labour were reinforced during both lectures and tutorials.

The major project was undertaken in groups of three to four students. The product chosen for the study had to be cleared by the tutor to ensure that the students could effectively undertake the task during the semester. Ideally, students were expected to draw extensively from their own and the group's background regarding the marketing process to be adopted. Lectures assisted in providing the theoretical material necessary to complete the task.

The Peer Learning assessment was conducted through continuous weekly tutorial discussions, with presentations done in academic week 12 of semester. In line with the department's assessment policy, only 25% of marks may be provided by group work. This was split into a written paper (15%) and an oral presentation (10%). Each member received the same marks but

an allowance was made for students to change the percentage award at their discretion, which was not taken advantage of. Additional assessments consisted of a mid-semester exam (20%), case study report (15%), and a final exam (40%).

Data Collection

Data was collected via dual methods of a questionnaire (with a quantitative and qualitative section) and focus groups, all conducted at the end of the course. The questionnaires measured student attitudes about the efficacy of Peer Learning for improving learning outcomes. Responses in the quantitative section were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Example questions were: Peer Learning 'Improved my course content knowledge', and Peer Learning 'Improved my application of theory to practice'. The qualitative section consisted of two open-ended questions about the strengths and weaknesses of Peer Learning (i.e. what the students thought of the practical implementation). The questionnaire also contained demographic questions. Focus groups were also interviewed from each subject for their viewpoints on the Peer Learning experience. Candidates were partly self-selected and partly assigned, with the lecturer asking randomly picked students to stay behind after the lecture, while requesting that any other interested students include themselves as well. Students were not given any external incentive to attend the focus groups, and the lecturer of each subject was absent for the entire process. Topics covered included general course feedback, a general discussion on Peer Learning, the problems with participation or speaking up, issues with peer evaluation and general evaluation of students, and the advantages and disadvantages of the Peer Learning paradigm itself (i.e. the students' beliefs and opinions about the concept of Peer Learning).

Results and Discussion

The two focus groups came up with a number of advantages and disadvantages, while the qualitative section of the questionnaire revealed a number of strengths and weaknesses. These are shown in Table 1. The top five most improved skills as rated by the students in the quantitative section of the questionnaire are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: The Advantages/ Disadvantages of <u>Concept</u>; Strengths/ Weaknesses of <u>Implementation</u> of PL as Identified by Students Across Both Courses

Advantages	Disadvantages	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ability to learn from others	Time management difficulties	Group work skills	Time consuming
Different learning style to lectures	English language deficits in some students	Communication skills	Within group problems
Working to people's strengths	Differing commitment levels	Personal abilities	Differing standards between students
Combining talents	Difficulty in determining people's skills	International understanding	Content issues

Solidifying learning			Improved learning	Lack of structure

Table 2: Top Five Most Improved Skills as Rated by Students

Course A	M	Course B	M
Understanding of how others interact	5.67	Team work skills	5.42
Critical thinking skills	5.61	Skills of how to 'manage' others	5.38
Ability to learn from others	5.56	Understanding of how others interact	5.38
Ability to learn	5.52	Ability to learn from others	5.38
Course content knowledge	5.48	Awareness of what is happening at meetings	5.28

The results of the current study are remarkably similar to those found by Hogan (1999), with very similar advantages and disadvantages being identified. The only area not similar concerned students learning about autonomous learning and personal responsibility for self-motivation. Though this concept was covered by the lecturers at the outset of the courses, it was not specifically measured in the current study (a limitation to be rectified in future studies). Thus, it can be concluded that the Peer Learning design was successful in improving several key learning components, being knowledge acquisition, skill development and personal growth, in these students. The results also confirm that the graduate courses showed the same favourable results using Peer Learning as the undergraduate courses in previous literature, indicating the value of the Peer Learning design to the higher levels of academic study. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that students appreciated the philosophy and outcomes of the Peer Learning design. The lecturers have some recommendations, including requiring students to identify their personal role in the project, and to constantly reinforce the underlying concepts and principles of Peer Learning throughout the course, so as to engage the students in their own learning experience.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the study included some lack of collaboration between the two lecturers involved, in that they implemented Peer Learning in slightly different ways (though with the same theoretical underpinnings). As such, there were different numbers of assessment items between the courses, and the items themselves covered different domains, making direct comparison between the courses somewhat difficult. The demographic composition of the classes was also different, with Course B consisting of approximately 95% Asian international students, where Course A had a more even balance between cultural backgrounds (though still mainly international students). As the background of how the students can influence the implementation strategy required (Sampson & Cohen, 2001a) it is worth studying how demographic differences influences the uptake of Peer Learning principles in future studies, including a study of how the previous experiences of students (regarding group work) influence the outcomes of Peer Learning. Future studies should also look at implementing Peer Learning across different institutions, levels of study, and courses, and comparing results between these to further isolate those factors that contribute to (and inhibit) Peer Learning success.

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