

**Cover sheet**

These documents were the handouts used in the training session for Psychology PAL facilitators on 25 Sept 2003. They are here for our convenience: they are not meant to make sense by themselves to others.

Cover sheet: Steve Draper

Main training document: Steve Draper

Encouraging participation: from the Bournemouth site

Session Planning: Bournemouth? Fiona Black?

Timing sheet: Fiona Black

Difficult incidents: Fiona Black

Workshop evaluation form: Bournemouth site

# PAL scheme

## Potential educational benefits

These are possible benefits to the clients. Achieving any one is worthwhile; but often we can achieve several with one activity.

- **Supplemental instruction.** Any extra information from peers or facilitators can be helpful as an extra learning resource.
- Any extra **processing** is likely to promote learning: learning is strongly dependent on the time spent actually thinking about the subject.
- **Deep learning.** Time spent discussing the real meaning of the concepts in the course leads to "deep learning", longer retention, and greater ability to use the concepts in different contexts.
- **Social and academic "integration"** (see Tinto's model). This refers to getting to know others, and still more to feeling at home in the class, department, university, city, and in the role of student.
- **Mentoring.** The way a person new to a role (in this case the role of being a student on a course) picks up unwritten skills about how to perform it successfully by observing and interacting with a more experienced person (the mentor).
- **Peer Assisted Learning:** learning from and by discussing issues with one's peers. This is probably even more use to the information giver than to the receiver, because explaining requires reprocessing the material. But it is also useful to the receiver, not least because peers are 100 times more available than staff.
- The higher level aim of this ("auto-PAL") is to get students into the **habit of using** peers and **peer discussion** routinely in all future learning: a fundamental study skill.
- **Reflection.** The practice of not just doing learning, but thinking about your learning process: how well you are doing, how you go about learning, and whether your methods and habits are being effective.

## The essential value from peers

Another way of looking at it is that PAL is based on the fundamental insight that, for a learner, other learners can help in ways teachers are fundamentally unequipped to do (besides being cheaper, more numerous, and usually more available). Firstly, in giving explanations adapted to the learner. If you ask a teacher to explain something they have told you, many just repeat what they said: and the more scholarly and careful a teacher is, the more trapped they may be in this since they had planned carefully to say it as well as it possibly could be the first time. A teacher less expert in the subject matter, but better at teaching, may be able to paraphrase more or less deeply. But the essential issue is that (as constructivism asserts) learning depends not just on the desired end state but on the learner's beginning state: their prior knowledge and conceptions. Other learners are likely to know that from the inside, teachers cannot; so other learners can use referents and common knowledge they have, know what the difficulties and apparent objections are to the new concept, and so on. The second respect in which learners, especially perhaps students a year ahead, are better at teaching than teachers (especially at universities) is in study methods: they can say from personal experience what was important to do on this course, what worked and what didn't, what should and shouldn't be worried about. The person giving the course has never taken it, and has no direct experience of these aspects; and at university typically actually has no knowledge at all of how students cope with it.

### **A robust recipe**

So what is the "real" PAL? Like the best designs and academic activities, in PAL multiple benefits fit naturally together, and if any one works well it will be worthwhile. The benefits don't all have to work all the time for every student. It is a naturally robust design, and we can reasonably expect benefits overall without being sure of which will prove successful in a particular case.

In other words, there can be many types of PAL, all worthwhile. Almost certainly, different implementations (consciously or not) aim for different subsets of the potential benefits. On the other hand, we could use the above analysis to try to get all the benefits: each could be specifically tackled in the training of facilitators, in the agenda/lesson plan they use each session, in the advertising to students (suggesting why it is worth attending), and in evaluation measures used.

### **The recipe for the PAL scheme in Psychology in 2003-4**

Here are the main ingredients of the particular kind of PAL scheme we are attempting.

- The PAL group sessions
- Pairs of facilitators (rather than single ones)
- Their role is not that of expert, but mainly to support the group process
- Weekly feedback sessions. Training: there is this workshop, but much of the learning will be in the weekly meetings. The facilitators (and organisers) will be learning as a group.
- There will be a substantial web component to the scheme, for both clients and facilitators.
- Every PAL session is to have its content reported ASAP on the web by the facilitators.
- Paper attendance records must also be completed by the facilitators.

### **Overall principles priorities for the PAL scheme in Psychology in 2003-4**

- A. The order of priority in modifying the scheme to suit different groups' interests are:
1. The client students' (academic) benefit
  2. The facilitators
  3. The organisers
- B. At both the level of each PAL session and the scheme overall look for a combination of and balance between:
- a) Listening to what clients' concerns and interests are
  - b) Offering suggestions from the outside for topics and activities.
- C. Look for a balance between each individual's needs, and the group as a whole
- D. It is NOT a principle to perpetuate PAL for its own sake. If attendance drops off because students are meeting their needs elsewhere, or have organised their own less formal groups, that is success not failure. If in a group, a facilitator doesn't have to say a word because the group itself has taken over managing the agenda, then that is success, not failure.

### **Training aims**

Training is only indirectly linked to the desired benefits of the PAL scheme: it needs to focus on a) what practical actions the facilitators must take, b) the ones they may find particularly unnatural and so need some practice with.

## **ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION**

### **1. Ask open-ended questions**

- The best questions are usually open-ended (that require more than a yes, no or short answer). Open-ended questions are better because they require students to provide lengthy and therefore more substantial responses. The more students talk, the better the student leader and other students are able to understand their ideas and thinking.

### **2. Wait for student responses**

- It is important to train yourself to wait for student answers. Students may need time to think and gain confidence when asked a question. After a while they will usually respond with an answer or another question. Waiting for answers is a difficult but important skill – it can be very tempting to answer questions for students or jump in with another question or answer – learn to be patient and this will usually lead to better discussion and more group involvement.
- Encourage them to find the answers in their lecture notes.
- You should also wait for other students to comment after a member of the class has said something. Don't immediately label an answer right or wrong – wait to see if other students have anything to add, and encourage them to do so.

### **3. Use Socratic questioning**

- Socratic questioning can be used to lead students to correct answers. This is where the PAL Leader breaks down difficult concepts into small chunks of information that students can answer more easily. Instead of asking "How do we address this whole problem?" ask first "What is the first thing we need to do to understand this?"

### **4. Encourage student questions**

- Student questions form the raw material for PAL sessions. Always ask if students have questions and offer plenty of time to answer.

### **5. Place the emphasis on student ideas**

- Always encourage students to share their thoughts, because students build new concepts upon their own ideas and new course material.

### **6. Be a role model by using "I" statements yourself**

- Reflecting on your first year experience and being open and direct with the group. If you don't understand something or can't remember, then say so. This will help students feel that you are involved as a participant – what would you have done?

### **7. Avoid interrupting student answers**

- PAL should be a safe and comfortable environment for students to try things out, attempt answers and make mistakes. Remember it is often from making mistakes that our best learning comes about.

### **8. Refer to the syllabus regularly**

- Encourage students to bring their course handbook containing unit syllabi to PAL sessions. Check that students understand the requirements of the reading lists, assignments and any tests/projects. Get them to look regularly at the learning outcomes for each unit so they are well aware of what they should be able to do.

### **9. Use small group/ pair work**

- Use individual and pair work to get students involved. The student leader can create a problem or two based on the course for students to do. This can help students become immersed in the material and provide a springboard for discussion. Where students are engaged in individual or pair work this can also provide an opportunity for the leader to offer more individual assistance.

### **10. Get students to use the whiteboard**

- Physical activity helps prevent students being too passive or bored, it also encourages students to talk to one another.

### **11. Use positive reinforcement**

- This can have a positive effect on learning and confidence.
- Examples of positive reinforcement include offering praise for an answer (even if not correct), using a posture of interest and concern, maintaining eye contact, smiling and nodding and making positive comments.

### **12. Repeat student responses**

This can act as positive reinforcement, to summarise or clarify comments and enable others to hear comments.

## **Some considerations for PAL session-planning**

- How will you arrange the room?
- Where will you sit?
- What materials will you need?
- How will you welcome people into the session?
- How will you introduce PAL to the group?
- How will you introduce the group members to each other?
- How can you make the early sessions feel relaxed, enjoyable and friendly?
- Will you use a 'contract'?
- Will you use a 'ice-breaker'?
- How will you refer to/use the study pack?
- What will you do if students expect you to teach them?
- How will you ensure that individual members communicate with one another?
- How will you ensure you keep to time?
- How will you end a session?

## **Some tips (see 'Encouraging Participation')**

- **Ask open-ended questions**
- **Wait for student responses**
- **Use Socratic questioning**
- **Encourage student questions**
- **Place the emphasis on student ideas**
- **Be a role model – use 'I' statements**
- **Avoid interrupting student answers**
- **Refer to the syllabus regularly**
- **Use small group/pair work**
- **Get students to use the whiteboard**
- **Use positive reinforcement**
- **Repeat student responses**

<b>Timings and Materials</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<p>How long do I spend on a specific activity?            What time do I want to move on to the next activity at?            What do I need? (eg. Watch; handouts; paper; register; whiteboard pen; name badges etc )</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should I use an ice-breaker? Which one?</li> <li>• Do I need to finish off/recap anything from the previous week?</li> <li>• Which section of the Study Pack will I use?</li> <li>• How will I end the session?</li> </ul>	<p>What will I say?            NIB to expect the unexpected.            NIB that PAL is a GROUP activity.</p>

## Dealing with difficult incidents

However skillful you are and whatever techniques you use you are likely to run into difficult situations in small group work. Challenges can be threatening and it can be hard to spot these coming and deal with them quietly and successfully. This exercise is about strategies to cope with these difficult incidents.

For each problem incident that is an issue for you, make notes on how you might deal with it. Add and respond to your own problem incidents in the spaces provided.

<b>Problem incident</b>	<b>How you could deal with it</b>
Only one student turns up	
More students than expected turn up	
The whole group is silent and unresponsive	
An individual is silent and unresponsive	
Subgroups start forming and private conversations start	
The group becomes dependant on the leader	
Discussion goes off the point	
Two people arrive late and distract others	
Two group members are very dominant	
One member complains about the way you are facilitating the group	

Group members reject the facilitation process and demand to be told	
Group members do not answer when you ask a question	
One member is aggressive and racist	
Members are not listening to each other. Discussion is not building on previous contributions	
Members start arguing with each other	
The exercise fails or goes wrong	
Dealing with inaccurate responses	
Group going round in circles	
No creativity	
Lack of support for ideas	
Information only flows from one member of the group	
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## **Some Principles of PAL**

1. PAL is a methodology for learner support.
2. PAL is small group learning.
3. PAL is facilitated by other students acting as mentors.
4. PAL is confidential.
5. PAL is voluntary.
6. PAL is non-remedial.
7. PAL is participative.
8. PAL encourages collaborative learning, rather than competitive learning.
9. PAL is content based and process orientated.
10. Pal integrates effective learning strategies within the course content.
11. PAL works in the language of the discipline.
12. PAL does not create dependency.
13. PAL is pro-active, not reactive.
14. PAL encourages learner autonomy.
15. PAL decreases drop out rates and aids retention.
16. PAL gives opportunity to increase academic performance.
17. PAL challenges the barriers between year groups.
18. PAL benefits all students regardless of current academic competency.
19. PAL gives privacy to practise the subject and make mistakes and build up confidence.
20. PAL enables a clear view of course expectations.

## **Another view: reflection**

Another view of this is that PAL supports a form of reflection about one's learning. The private mode of reflection is done alone, perhaps by writing a private diary. A group version is talking about your thoughts about your own learning to others: obviously you need to feel as open as you would to a private diary. If you do, then it can be better since you hear others' experiences and opinions and not just your own. But if learn to think in this way in a group, you may transfer it to a private practice later. Another thing about reflection is that it is about thinking over whatever concerns you: not what you "should" be considering, but what actually matters to you at the moment.



**What would you have changed about the training?**

**Any further comments**