

**Implementing Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education:  
The experience of a new university and a model for the  
achievement of a mainstream programme**

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## **Implementing Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education: The experience of a new university and a model for the achievement of a mainstream programme**

The experience of implementing Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education over a three-year period is described. Developments in methods of implementation are placed in the context of embedding the scheme at an institutional level and conditions for success when setting up such a scheme are proposed. A timetable for effective implementation of PAL over the course of an academic year is put forward, and experiences and recommendations are placed in the context of Ashwin's (2002) model for implementing peer learning schemes.

### **Introduction**

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) has now been established at a number of Higher Education Institutions across the United Kingdom over a comprehensive range of undergraduate courses since at least the early 1990's (e.g. Wallace, 1992; Gunning, 1993; Rust & Wallace, 1994; Donelan & Kay, 1998; Saunders & Gibbon, 1998; Capstick & Fleming, 2001; Wallace, 2003). The different driving forces behind the range of schemes reflect the variety in the methods by which they have come into being: initially Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) provided money and rationale (Donelan, 1994); PAL has come about under the impetus both of central services and from within subject centres (e.g. Coe et al., 1999). PAL has been implemented as a means of tackling poor retention as well as to complement the learning experience of students (Wallace, 2003).

Whilst the benefits of PAL and its variants have been demonstrated in the literature, for example improved grades (e.g. Bidgood, 1994) and skills development (Donelan, 1999), good practice remains to some extent to be discovered through experience by those seeking to run such a programme. Whilst this of course has its value, practitioners do risk repeating the mistakes of others before them. It is not uncommon for example for PAL schemes in the early stages to suffer low attendance by students or resistance by academic staff (e.g. Healy, 1994; Coe et al., 1999; Saunders & Gibbon, 1998; Ashwin, 2002). Such issues may appear at the time to the implementer to be disastrous, however it is important to emphasise that these difficulties are entirely normal. Perhaps what would be more useful however would be to provide a practical framework for those with an interest in implementing PAL such that they may stand the best chance of steering through such impediments and attaining the desired success. It is such a framework that this article seeks to present.

Insight has been given previously to factors bearing upon and methods of implementation of PAL, (e.g. Ashwin, 2002; Falchikov, 2002; Topping & Ehly, 1998). These authors have drawn attention to issues such as those concerned with effecting culture change in organisations and working with technical aspects (e.g. scheduling PAL). This will alert practitioners new and experienced to matters to be aware of, however a concrete set of suggested actions to be taken to accord with such theoretical underpinning is still required. The aim of this article therefore is to describe in more practical terms how PAL may be implemented and cultivated across an institution, based on the experience of the authors of setting up and developing PAL from a central service for a wide range of courses. This will be set against the background of how PAL at Bournemouth University has developed since its inception in 2001 and related particularly to Ashwin's (2002) model for implementing PAL.

## **Terminology and scheme description**

The term Peer Assisted Learning has been used to describe schemes quite different from that discussed here. Topping & Ehly (1998) for example use PAL as an umbrella term for systems operating at a number of stages in the education system and with varying principles. Conversely, the term PAL may be used to refer to one specific model within the gamut of peer learning schemes. Peer tutoring describes a classification of schemes inclusive of PAL but also of other types of peer learning (Topping, 1996). To make matters more confusing, nomenclature abounds: Peer Assisted Study Support, Peer Support, Peer Assisted Learning Support, Supplemental Instruction are a number of terms which to the untrained eye describe schemes virtually indistinguishable from PAL. In fact, even to the trained eye, terminology may appear fairly arbitrary and does not belie any evolved taxonomy (though see Topping (1996) for a typology of peer tutoring).

Theory and practice of PAL as described here can be traced back to the tradition of Supplemental Instruction (SI) in the United States (e.g. Arendale, 1994) and through the conveyance and adaptation of this model to the UK in the early 1990's (Wallace, 1992). With the seeding of SI came schemes which retained the moniker, also schemes have tended to christen and adapted themselves according to circumstance. PAL is one such programme.

PAL may be defined as a scheme for learning support and enhancement that enables students to work co-operatively under the guidance of students from the year above. Most usually, second year students (PAL Leaders) facilitate weekly study support sessions for groups of first years. In practice, this means that an individual or pair of PAL Leaders meets with an allocated group of up to fifteen to twenty individuals and manages discussion and activities particular to those students' course of study (the 'PAL session').

PAL sessions are intended to offer a safe, friendly place to help students adjust quickly to university life, improve their study habits, acquire a clear view of course direction and expectations and enhance their understanding of the subject matter of their course through group discussion. The main purposes of PAL are to aid retention of first year students, support the first year student experience, enhance the learning experience of PAL Leaders and provide a further mechanism of communication to teaching staff and students.

The authors do not intend to present PAL as a rigid system, either in its construction or protocol. Indeed, a willingness to adapt and innovate within a system of broad practice has become a hallmark of PAL across the UK.

## **Implementation of PAL – previous descriptions of the process**

Within a collection of articles edited by Rust & Wallace (1994) a number of items pertaining to successful implementation are prominent through eight case studies of implementing PAL/SI in the UK. Timetabling of PAL is mentioned consistently as both of fundamental importance to PAL but in its execution as being a major problem. The need to convince academic staff of the value of PAL and/or to engage them in the process is frequently mentioned, as is a search for a suitable role for the central PAL co-ordinator. Promotion of PAL and the value of PAL to students is seen as being central to achieving their engagement. Whilst PAL Leaders are generally enthusiastic and committed, the same cannot be relied upon in the attitude of first year students towards PAL – hence problems of attendance (compounded by timetabling problems, etc.) A further collection of articles (Dolan & Castley, 1998) also includes reflections on the implementation experience, including reference to designing training and

reward for peer support schemes (Boyle, 1998) and placing PAL in the context of Higher Education trends (Nene & Dolan, 1998).

In discussing the planning of peer tutoring, Falchikov (2002) identifies persuading colleagues and overcoming resistance to change as key to the process, particularly in terms of selling the scheme - she suggests that 'all [stakeholder groups] are likely to be influenced in a positive way by hearing verbal accounts of successful schemes, and by having access to dossiers of evaluative reports'. Goodlad (2002) details some 'golden rules' for implementation: defining clear aims for the scheme; defining roles (including for co-ordination of the scheme); training of peer tutors; structuring content; providing support for peer tutors; attention to logistics and undertaking evaluation.

PAL at Bournemouth has experienced many of the issues and problems encountered by others; over time the programme has been able to be cultivated into one that has acquired the ability to address these by adaptations in its implementation.

### **Implementation of PAL institution-wide and independently**

Ashwin (2002) makes the comparison between peer learning implemented across an organisation as opposed to upon individual courses, stating that each presents different issues. At a macro level, the implementation of PAL across an institution presents issues of 'organisation change' which are relevant to its methods of implementation.

It might be considered perhaps that there is some hierarchy here: for PAL to be implemented across an institution it must necessarily be implemented on individual courses; for PAL to be implemented on individual courses this may or may not be a part of an institution-wide strategy. It will likely be the case that PAL implemented across an organisation will require the co-ordination of some central service - however enthusiastic is the Chemist who sets PAL up they are highly unlikely to be able to apply their zeal on a wider basis. Where PAL is implemented by an academic on their own course, this may be a self-contained endeavour, however where a central co-ordination service is available the implementation should constitute a partnership.

As has Ashwin, we take as our frame of reference the implementation of PAL across the institution, remaining mindful however of the issues of importance at a course level. It should further be noted that Ashwin's model was designed in reference to his experience of setting up PAL in Further Education, though it is considered here that there is much similarity between FE and HE in the processes of implementing PAL.

### **PAL at Bournemouth University**

PAL at Bournemouth came into being as part of a Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (phase 3) project (HEFCE, 2001). The aims of the Project are dissemination-based and include the implementation of PAL at Bournemouth.

#### ***Core elements***

Whilst, as will be seen, the Bournemouth programme has changed aspects of its implementation strategy, certain core elements have been a feature of the programme since its inception and are likely to remain crucial:

- PAL Leaders are trained for their role. This takes place over two days at the beginning of the academic year (just prior to induction week). An extended follow-up programme has now been added.
- PAL Leaders are paid at £5/hour for running PAL sessions and meeting staff.
- PAL is course-specific: PAL Leaders support students from within their own course and attend to matters course-specific as well as some non-course-related matters (e.g. housing)
- PAL is about the realisation of co-operative learning. PAL Leaders do not 'teach'.
- PAL is co-ordinated centrally by PAL staff and at a course level by at least one member of the teaching team
- PAL is available to students on a regular (usually weekly) basis, at a predetermined time and location, through the academic year
- PAL is student-centred but encourages contribution by the course teaching team, in order to ensure that PAL addresses the core aspects of the course in an appropriate way, especially its subject matter

### ***PAL 2001-2***

The first attempt to implement PAL was made in the academic year 2001-2. It is central to the philosophy of SI, and so was by association PAL, that it 'targets high risk courses not high risk students' and so an effort was made to set PAL up on three (sets of) courses across three Schools that were considered to be high-risk, either because of attrition rates or because they contained 'difficult' subject elements.

For each course, two allotted slots per week were provided with a seminar room booked in which PAL sessions could be conducted. For each PAL slot, two or three PAL Leaders worked together to provide support to any students that wished to attend. Course PAL contacts – members of the teaching team who had taken on the responsibility for PAL within the course – met with their PAL Leaders on an *ad hoc* basis to discuss progress. There was little or no instances of members of the teaching team providing activities (what we now term 'directed activities').

PAL during 2001-2 was not particularly successful, this was largely due to a low level of attendance at PAL by first year students. One course did have some sustained though medium to low levels of attendance; another had usually zero attendance though with occasional peaks (prior to an assignment or after promoting PAL); the final course had sustained levels of zero or almost zero attendance.

As the PAL Project external evaluator put it at the time: 'attendance by first years is not sufficient for the success of the scheme but it is at least a necessary condition'.

### ***PAL 2002-3***

After a somewhat disappointing first year, the methods by which PAL were implemented were adjusted in preparation for the expansion of the programme. Six (sets of) courses ran PAL during 2002-3, drawn from six Schools.

Having considered feedback from staff and students, we also talked with practitioners running PAL elsewhere the following changes were made to the implementation of the scheme:

- Effective timetabling of PAL came to be seen as key so that PAL features as an expectation of the course with a clear presence. This meant that:
  - PAL sessions should be timetabled at as convenient a place as possible in the first year timetable (ideally at a point in the day *between* lectures or seminars)
  - PAL sessions should appear in black and white on first years' timetables, at the time these timetables are distributed, and not be added later
  - A single PAL Leader or a pair of PAL Leaders should be allocated to a specified seminar group (or other fixed group of first year students), so that they can develop a close link with the group
  - To achieve the above a commitment would be sought from courses that the timetabling of PAL features as a consideration through the timetabling process (as opposed to an attempt to slot it in once the rest of the timetable has been constructed)
  - It was recognised that the timetabling process was most effectively organised by courses, with involvement by central PAL co-ordinators often offering only confusion (though not to say they should not be available to advise where appropriate)
  
- Greater course teaching team involvement was sought. This represented a philosophical shift from an attempt to create a scheme the strength of which lay largely in the salience of its student ownership (but with profound weakness of minimal attendance) to an attempt to create a scheme which still had a foundation in student ownership but received support from the teaching team. This meant that:
  - A named member of the course teaching team – the 'course PAL contact' – was responsible for PAL on the course. The course PAL contact would meet on a weekly or fortnightly basis with the group of PAL Leaders, usually with one of the PAL co-ordinators from the Central Support Services present. The course PAL contact would also report to their teaching team on matters PAL when appropriate.
  - The course teaching team were encouraged to become involved with PAL through the provision of directed activities that could be used in PAL sessions to facilitate learning (e.g. case studies, multiple-choice quizzes, enquiry-based learning exercises) and that would tie in with and reinforce the current subject matter of the course.
  - The course teaching team were encouraged to assist PAL Leaders by providing teaching schemes, course handbooks, assignment briefs etc.
  - Promotion of PAL by the course teaching team (e.g. in simple ways such as encouraging attendance at the end of a lecture) was encouraged.
  - In a number of cases, PAL Leaders have begun to be invited to course team meetings, to provide a feedback service to staff not unlike that offered by course representatives.

- A 'PAL staff network' was set up. Course PAL contacts and other interested members of course staff have been invited to a once-a-term meeting to discuss progress of PAL on their courses

In addition to the above, a decision was made to extend the initial training programme and run a weekly (in the Autumn term) and then fortnightly (in the Spring term) programme of follow-up training for PAL Leaders. This was felt to be important because it had proved difficult to maintain more than haphazard communication with some PAL Leaders the previous year, so that PAL Leaders as a cross-course group could discuss ideas and problems, and so that a training programme in study skills and skills and techniques of use in PAL sessions could be taught. Follow-up training sessions included essay writing, note taking, understanding assessment criteria, assertiveness, communication skills and group development.

PAL during 2002-3 showed a marked improvement. Attendance levels were higher on all courses during 2002-3 than they were on any of the 2001-2 courses and in each case satisfactory to excellent levels of attendance by first year students, overall, was achieved. This is not to say that some groups did not have higher attendance than others or that attendance did not vary through the year (i.e. high initially, high prior to assignments, low at the start of the Spring term) but a picture of greater engagement certainly emerged.

The greater engagement with PAL, it is felt, can be attributed to three factors in particular as discussed above, namely:

- Revised timetabling procedures
- Greater course involvement (both of which ensured that first year students saw PAL as a relevant extension to their course)
- Maintenance of contact with and training of PAL Leaders

As well as greater engagement by students with PAL, PAL was favourably appraised by both PAL Leaders and first year students (though a full discussion of student appraisal of PAL is outside the scope of this paper).

First year students reported that PAL was of benefit in terms of:

- Adjusting to university life, studying and culture
- The informality and opportunity for openness afforded by PAL sessions
- The cooperative aspects of PAL sessions
- Having the value of the PAL Leaders' perspective
- Understanding course subject matter
- Assignment completion
- Awareness of course direction and expectations
- Developing study skills
- Developing confidence with the course
- Using PAL as a means of communication with staff

PAL Leaders reported that PAL was of benefit in terms of:

- Skills development, particularly communication skills and self-confidence
- Revision of first year material provided them with valuable underpinning for their second year studies
- It was enjoyable

- Useful for placements, jobs, CVs and demonstrating a wider involvement in university life

Whilst PAL operated successfully, problems remained in terms of implementation, namely:

- The primary criticism of the scheme by first year students was that PAL lacked structure, format or clear aims
- Timetabled slots achieved were still in a number of cases unhelpful (e.g. on a day when first year students would otherwise have no commitments or at 6pm on a Friday) and much effort and diplomatic activity was needed to enable poorly-placed PAL sessions to relocate
- Some PAL Leaders were unsettled by the variability of their group's behaviour and attendance levels and by pressure exerted upon them to 'give answers'
- Course involvement was in many cases somewhat erratic
- The follow-up training programme did not achieve all it set out to: PAL Leaders were not much better equipped by attending them

### ***PAL 2003-4***

After a successful second year running PAL, all those courses that ran during 2002-3 will continue to run PAL during 2003-4. In addition a further eight (sets of) courses across all seven Schools at Bournemouth will also run PAL.

Central to the issue of mainstream introduction of PAL at Bournemouth has been the concept of organisation change (as described in Ashwin, 2002). In this context, a challenge in preparing for the academic year 2003-4 has been to pass on the responsibility for paying PAL Leaders from the PAL Project to individual Schools. Project funds finish in early 2004 and it was also seen as important to the long-term ownership of PAL by Schools that this commitment was made. This has in large part been a smooth transition. Factors contributing to the ability to pass on financial commitment in this way have been:

- Visible success of PAL during 2002-3 serving as promotion of value of scheme.
- PAL course contact and in some cases PAL Leaders playing an active role in achieving funding commitment from Heads of Learning and Teaching and Heads of School.
- PAL coordinators from central support services playing an active role in achieving funding commitment from Heads of Learning and Teaching and Heads of School.
- Commitment by PAL coordinators to present comprehensive evaluation of PAL during 2004.

Three further changes of emphasis have characterised the lead up to PAL for 2003/4:

- An assertion that timetabling must be the responsibility of course teams. It was the case during 2002/3 that ill-timed slots for PAL sessions resulted in extra amounts of work for PAL coordinators and also course staff - rearranging session times to suit PAL Leaders and the student group, finding rooms for these times (which were often not able to be consistent) and letting first year students know of the changes, proved to be more than an annoyance and in fact became almost unmanageable. With double the



number of courses for 2003-4 it will simply not be possible to attend to a large series of changes near the start of the academic year. Timetabling becoming the full responsibility of course teams therefore should mean that, for a commitment during the Summer planning period, PAL coordinators' time and course staff time are not unnecessarily expended in the Autumn and also that the confusion inevitably resulting from such changes does not adversely affect attendance at or perceptions of PAL.

- A re-presentation of the nature of PAL to course teams, in reciprocal terms, that PAL will benefit from provision of materials and advice to PAL Leaders by teaching staff, but also teaching staff should be aware that PAL can be of use to them, for example in helping students prepare for assignments and seminars, consolidating taught material and gaining feedback on how the course is being received. It has also been requested that PAL course contacts meet regularly (weekly or fortnightly) with PAL Leaders rather than on an *ad hoc* basis.
- A change in presentation of generic materials to PAL Leaders (produced by central PAL staff). PAL Leaders made the request that materials be more functional, in that they may for example have a clear and comprehensive stock of activities and ideas that they may use in PAL sessions, analogous to the '53 interesting things to do in seminars' publication (Habershaw et al., 1995). This, combined with input from course staff will it is hoped enable PAL sessions to be more structured.

It has been learnt that central PAL staff simply do not have the resources or facilities to achieve such key requirements as timetabling and provision of course-specific directed activities. In effect then, the expansion and increased engagement with PAL has been much connected with heightened and more efficient course involvement.

#### ***Summary - development of PAL at Bournemouth 2001-4***

Table 1 illustrates key changes in implementation of PAL over this period.

**Table 1 : PAL at Bournemouth 2001-4**

	<b>Pilot : 2001-2</b>	<b>2002-3</b>	<b>2003-4</b>
No. PAL Leaders	15	34	c.80
No. First year students PAL available to	320	600	c.1300
No. 'sets' of courses - courses	3 - 8	6 - 13	30
PAL Leaders' pay	Paid through Project funds (c.£2000)	Paid through Project funds (c.£6000)	Paid by Schools (c.£20,000)
Recruitment criteria; acceptance/rejection procedure	Unspecified	Person specification developed	As 2003; recommendation that unsuccessful applicants be counselled by course staff
Attendance by first year students	Low overall	Satisfactory to high	Aim: high attendance though fluctuations likely
Course involvement	Variable; limited to <i>ad hoc</i> meetings with staff contact	Variable; more regular meetings and some course team involvement	Aim: Regular meetings between PAL Leaders and staff contact with input from and feedback to course team
Course PAL contact	In place, though responsibilities and activities unclear	In place with clearer role; more regular meetings with PAL Leaders	Aim: Role clearly defined; regular plan and review meetings with PAL Leaders
Promotion	Formally, in perhaps dogmatic terms	Room for innovation and sensitivity to different groups' needs	As 2003; refinement of process
Balance of responsibility for content of PAL sessions (students / staff)	Entirely student-centred	Mostly student-centred but with important input by staff	Aim: healthy balance permitting structure but also flexibility
Use of directed activities (course)	Minimal	Some unsystematic provision by central and course staff	Aim: more systematic and widespread provision
Use of directed activities (generic)	Implied	Activities pertaining to study skills and ways of encouraging participation offered but not taken up widely	Aim: more clarity and practical stock of generic PAL activities available to PAL Leaders
Training	Two-day course	Two-day course with weekly/fortnightly follow-up training	As 2003 but with more flexible delivery for follow-up training and refined programme
PAL Leader: student matching	Any PAL Leader available to any student within a course	PAL Leaders allocated to a particular seminar group (though may negotiate cover etc.)	As 2002-3
Timetabling	Open sessions - interested first years can attend which and when they choose; did not appear on printed timetables	Timetabled PAL sessions by seminar group; variability in 'convenience' of slots; did appear on printed timetables responsibility for timetabling unclear; some revisions early in the year	Aim: 'convenient' slots for PAL sessions the responsibility of individual courses with central support and guidance
Type of course	'High-risk'	Some high-risk courses; also open to approaches	Current courses maintained; Schools decide where to place PAL

Table 2 shows how the lessons learnt during the period of implementation at Bournemouth University translate into a set of conditions for success of PAL.

**Table 2 : Conditions for realisation of an institution-wide PAL scheme**

Necessary	Desirable	Reason
Approval and awareness of PAL by course teaching team	Active involvement and ownership: provision of directed activities, teaching schemes etc.; PAL feature of course team meetings etc.	Official backing lends credibility; materials provided help create productive and focussed PAL sessions; PAL becomes a 'part' of the course
Consideration of whether PAL runs on part/all of course	Decision made clear to students; flexible to change	Clarity on matters which PAL is intended to focus on
Timetabling of PAL	PAL timetabled by year 1 seminar group at convenient time, with PAL Leader(s) attached to each group	Essential to enable good levels of attendance; presents as a course expectation
Nominated PAL staff contact; meets PAL Leaders on a regular basis	Other staff communication with PAL Leaders	Progress reviewed and preparation for sessions conducted regularly and as a team
Some central co-ordination	Attendance by central PAL staff at PAL staff – PAL Leaders meeting; observation of some PAL sessions; available for course team meetings	Support and guidance on running PAL; observation enables quality control and PAL Leader appraisal; PAL case made to teaching team and questions answered
Initial training	Ongoing training	PAL Leaders have grounding in skills and principles relevant to PAL
Inclusive recruitment: students invited to apply	Sensitive appointment of PAL Leaders and sensitive rejection of unsuitable applicants	
Evaluative mechanism	Quantitative (assessing impact of PAL on grades, retention) and Qualitative (survey questionnaires, interviews with first year students and PAL Leaders)	Provides evidence of effectiveness of PAL scheme and informs how the programme can be developed
Committed and enthusiastic PAL Leaders	PAL Leaders well supported and involved in design, planning and review of PAL	PAL Leaders are <i>the</i> most important group - the 'ground troops' - their involvement is vital

## **Implementation of PAL - comparison with Ashwin's (2002) model**

Ashwin (2002) spent three years attempting to implement PAL with limited success - whilst backing from management was forthcoming, involvement by staff and students remained low - and subsequently reviewed and developed the existing PAL (SI) strategy into a model for implementation of the scheme. A comparison will be made here with the experiences described by Ashwin and those at Bournemouth, in the context of the model.

### *Putting PAL in Context*

Ashwin emphasises the importance of 'putting the innovation into the context of current conflicts in the system'. Focussing on retention and achievement as outcomes of PAL, it is suggested, may reflect the concerns of management, however this was not commensurate with the attitude of teachers, nor, through implication by their lack of attendance, of the concerns of students. Ashwin developed this strategy by deliberately presenting PAL differently to different groups: to managers retention and achievement were still emphasised; to teachers and students PAL was now presented as a tool to shape and support courses.

In a similar way, a shift away from a presentation of PAL as a retention fixer and/or 'grade raiser' has come to pass at Bournemouth. In promotional material used by PAL Leaders in their first PAL sessions, PAL is presented not in these terms but as active learning, based on discussion that can aid understanding of course material. That research indicates PAL can raise grades is mentioned, however the student-led, cooperative aspects of PAL are given import. Promotion of PAL for 2003-4 will also build upon the results of what first year students have said they see as being the benefits of PAL (as discussed above, such as the advantage of informal and honest discussion). There has also been a realisation that to many teaching staff the 'intangible' benefits of PAL are of consequence, and furthermore that PAL can be of benefit to them such as gaining more immediate feedback on reception of course material, and thus the retention/achievement issue has become less of a crux.

### *Involving those affected*

Ashwin emphasises the importance of 'involving those affected by the introduction of the innovation'. He mentions that 'SI is a predesigned peer learning scheme which has a rigid structure that is implemented regardless of the context in which it operates'. It was found that shifting away from such a fixed doctrine to develop a scheme where those affected by it were involved in its design helped PAL to be seen as more relevant to them.

At Bournemouth too, a shift has occurred which has been as 'a shift from the proprietary to the pragmatic' (to paraphrase our external evaluator). Initially, PAL was based upon the rigid model of SI too, however PAL has come to be more accommodating and adaptable to staff and students' needs. For example the 2002/3 BA Business Information Systems Management course used the first few weeks of the Autumn term to focus on a course project at the suggestion of staff and one of the courses new for 2003/4, BA Computer Visualisation and Animation, will use lab-based sessions, in a move away from solely discussion-based sessions. An example which occurred in a number of instances during 2003/4 was PAL sessions shifting from the classroom to the student café at the request of first year students and PAL operating library tours and social events, again at the suggestion of students. PAL

Leaders are involved in planning PAL sessions on a regular basis with their course PAL contact

### *Developing the innovation*

Ashwin points out that SI was not initially changed in response to its shortcomings but that feedback came to be used to help develop schemes.

PAL at Bournemouth has generated much feedback from students. A recurrent criticism of the PAL scheme by first year students has been that it is seen by many as being too unstructured, lacking in clear aims or format within the PAL session. Whilst it is felt that there should still be a place for open, unstructured (even meandering) discussion and work in PAL, because this is seen by many as an advantage of PAL, efforts are also being made to adapt PAL to incorporate greater structure. This is being done by: requesting staff to offer suggestions of activities for PAL sessions; training PAL Leaders in techniques for structuring PAL sessions (e.g. use of different sorts of group work, setting of aims at the start of a session); and the generation of 'stock' activities that may be used in PAL sessions, such as lecture review or assignment preparation activities.

### *Embedding the innovation*

Ashwin reports that PAL was embedded through the creation of a PAL co-ordinator post and later by encouraging teachers' ownership of the schemes.

Embedding at Bournemouth has occurred in the following ways:

- Approval for funding of a central PAL Co-ordinator post
- Nomination of a course PAL contact, who may be given remission for PAL against their teaching commitments
- Inclusion in varying instances of PAL in School Learning and Teaching Strategies and Business Plans (resulting in two out of seven Schools thus far implementing PAL on all their undergraduate courses)
- School agreement to pay PAL Leaders
- PAL featuring as a standing agenda item, with PAL Leaders in some instances invite to report to the course committee in a similar way to course representatives
- Steps being taken to include PAL in the university prospectus, web site and as part of the papers prepared for institutional audit

These events in themselves do not guarantee the longevity of PAL, though strengthen the likelihood of this.

## **Model for the implementation of PAL**

Based on the experience at Bournemouth, a model is now presented for the implementation of PAL across an institution, set out chronologically and based on milestones and ongoing action. This process begins around October to December of the academic year prior to PAL commencing for students. This is a somewhat idealised timetable and so should be tailored to suit the course and/or institution.

### ***October to December***

- Members of course team meet with central PAL staff to discuss interest in utilising PAL on their course(s).
- Course Leader liaises with Head of Learning and Teaching to notify them of their interest in running PAL.

### ***January and February***

- School decides on which courses it wishes to implement PAL.
- School agrees funds to pay PAL Leaders - estimated costs, with a follow-up training programme for which Leaders are paid for attending are c. £250 per Leader per year.
- One PAL Leader per seminar group needs to be recruited plus one or more extras to enable pair work and cover, and in case someone drops out.

### ***February***

- Central PAL staff meet with teaching teams so they are well informed about what PAL is and isn't, and what needs to be considered when implementing PAL.
- Agree whether PAL is to be targeted at a specific part of the course e.g. a 'difficult' unit or at the course as a whole. Discuss timetabling arrangements.
- Agree which member of the teaching team (e.g. Year 1 tutor) will act as PAL course contact. Responsibilities involve:
  - Meeting regularly with PAL Leaders (weekly/fortnightly) to plan and review activities, get feedback, sort out problems
  - Liaising with central PAL staff
  - Keeping other members of teaching team informed about how PAL is progressing and obtaining from them, where possible, suggestions and activities for PAL sessions
- Being a course PAL contact will take approximately one hour per week and remission may be sought for this.

### ***February and March***

- Central PAL staff arrange to talk to first year students on each course for which PAL will run in order to recruit Leaders. Central PAL staff and/or course PAL contact then collect application forms.

### ***April and May***

- Central PAL staff discuss applications to become PAL Leaders with PAL course contact.

- Successful applicants notified and told about training dates.
- Initial meeting takes place between prospective PAL Leaders, PAL course contact and central PAL staff for each course for which PAL will run.

### ***May, June and onwards***

- Staff to formulate ideas for directed activities for PAL sessions, particularly early on in the year.
- PAL sessions timetabled by course administration to ensure as convenient slots as possible are obtained and to enable PAL Leaders to attend PAL sessions.
- Publicity material for course handbooks, pre-course documentation etc. provided.

### ***July***

- Timing of PAL sessions on the timetable reviewed.
- New PAL Leaders written to with introductory information about PAL.

### ***August***

- Information about PAL included in pre-course documentation sent to prospective students.

### ***September***

- New PAL Leaders written to and asked to confirm attendance at initial training.
- Schedule of directed activities for PAL sessions agreed for part or all of Autumn term.
- Two day training for PAL Leaders at the start of Induction Week.
- PAL Leaders assigned to seminar groups.

### ***October***

- PAL Leaders involved in Induction Week - perhaps meeting their seminar group.
- First PAL sessions run.
- Course PAL contact meets with PAL Leaders after their first PAL session.
- Follow-up training programme begins. PAL Leaders' experiences discussed with central PAL staff and other PAL Leaders.

### ***October and ongoing***

- PAL Leaders meet with their group on a weekly basis to run PAL sessions.
- PAL Leaders plan PAL sessions with their group, course PAL contacts and central PAL staff.
- PAL Leaders keep in touch with their group via email, text messaging, word-of-mouth etc.
- Information about PAL displayed on noticeboards, at the end of lectures etc.
- Course PAL contact keeps in touch with central PAL staff and vice versa.
- Course PAL contact meets PAL Leaders on a regular basis (weekly, fortnightly).

- Central PAL staff observe at least two PAL sessions per PAL Leader.
- Central PAL staff available on a day-to-day basis to support PAL Leaders.
- Follow-up training for PAL Leaders organised by central PAL staff.
- Ongoing evaluation, feedback, collection of attendance records at PAL sessions etc.
- Central PAL staff and PAL course contacts prepare reports for course / School committees.

## **Conclusion**

There is no one model for implementing PAL. What has worked for Bournemouth may not work elsewhere and other innovations relevant to effecting organisational change may also prove effective. As a summary, however, the involvement of course teaching teams in recruiting and then communicating with PAL Leaders, promoting PAL to students and providing directed activities; the effective timetabling of PAL; comprehensive initial and follow-up training, support and supervision of PAL Leaders by central PAL staff; effective liaison between central PAL staff and course teams; and the ownership of PAL by students will all contribute towards generating a successful and well-attended scheme.



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