Peer Helpers in Community Engaged Learning (CEL): Reflections on a Pilot

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Abstract

In the Winter 2011 semester, a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) Peer Helper Unit (consisting of two undergraduate students) was piloted in one section of a third year sociology and anthropology undergraduate qualitative methods course. The students used community-based research (CBR) to learn qualitative methods via experiential and service learning. The initial thought was that having students who had completed a qualitative research methods course before would provide insight to students currently enrolled in the course. The unit met with the instructor weekly and submitted reflections to an online discussion board. The intent of this reflection paper is to highlight the role the Peer Helper Unit played in facilitating the course group work and the CBR projects from the perspective of both the peer helpers and the instructor. In addition, benefits and challenges of peer helpers embedded within courses are addressed.
Introduction

We begin this reflection by providing a brief introduction to the design of the course and the CEL Peer Helper Unit, then follow with reflections on the benefits and challenges of having Peer Helper Units linked to courses and of being a peer helper. This is followed with a discussion of how our experiences relate to the literature on peer helpers.

One section of Sociology/Anthropology SOAN 3070 (Qualitative and Observational Methods, a core requirement for Sociology and Anthropology majors) gives third year undergraduate students an opportunity to practice qualitative methods by undertaking research that addresses a local community partner’s expressed research needs. Therefore, this community engaged learning (CEL) experience draws on both experiential learning and service learning and thus exposes students to the local community and the local community to the students.

The Winter 2010 semester was the pilot of this community engaged learning approach for this course. Weekly 3 hour course classes were split with the first portion providing basic content via lecture and the second portion providing structured workshops, where student worked within their research teams, applying lecture and textbook materials to their community based research (CBR) project. "Community-Based Research (CBR) is collaborative, change-oriented research that engages faculty members, students, and community members in projects that address a community-identified need."\(^1\) The CBR project was designed to enable students to gain valuable skills in group work, qualitative research design, conducting ethical research, recruiting participants, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing data and presenting results through two modes: a qualitative research report and a poster presentation. In the Winter 2011 semester,

there were a total of 55 students, who self-selected into one of 7 student research teams, with each team consisting of 5-9 undergraduate students. The local community group was the Wellington Water Watchers and the research projects focused on understanding the range of motivations that influence local Guelph residents’ choice of drinking water (bottled, tap, etc.), with a specific focus on three specific subgroups: hockey parents (3 student teams), long-term residents (2 student teams), and immigrants (2 student teams). Two or three teams were assigned to a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) or instructor facilitator. In addition, a CEL Peer Helper Unit (subsequently described) was actively engaged in the workshop component.

At the University of Guelph, a peer helper is defined as “students helping students while enhancing their own leadership and communication skills” (http://studentlife.uoguelph.ca/lce/navigate/peer-helper-program). These programs generally exist in a number of different parts of campus, but this was the first time peer helpers were integrated as part of a course to facilitate this community engaged learning experience.² The instructor ([Author 1]) was introduced to the Peer Helper Program in the summer of 2010 by Rachel Farahbakhsh, the Community Engaged Learning Coordinator at Student Life. Other institutions have also implemented course based peer helpers in undergraduate courses.³

Two students from the Winter 2010 offering of the course agreed to be part of a pilot Sociology/Anthropology Community Engaged Learning (CEL) Peer Helper Unit. Students were invited to be part of the pilot unit based on excelling in the course and/or responding to an open call to assist at the end of the course. The main intention was that they would draw on their experiences in the course the previous year to assist students in the subsequent offering of the course.

The peer helpers also set out personal learning objectives as well as strategies for determining whether they had achieved their stated objectives at the beginning of the semester and returned to these through weekly reflections. These were documented through an online weekly discussion board (accessible only to the peer helpers and the instructor). The peer helpers were involved in weekly structured workshops that the students engaged in by 1) observing student group dynamics and 2) offering suggestions based on their own experiences working on the community based research projects last year.

The peer helpers also met weekly first with the instructor and then in joint meetings with the GTAs and instructor, provided their reflection on what worked and did not work in the previous week’s workshops, and provided input for upcoming workshops based on their experiences the previous year.

Instructor Perspective of Peer Helper Experience

From an instructor’s perspective, I see three overarching benefits to the CEL Peer Helper Unit, in terms of student learning, course design, and their own skill development, and each is elaborated on briefly below.

The peer helper input was integral to the student’s learning. For example, although not asked directly for this information, in student year-end reflections, students specifically commented on the assistance and perspective they gained by having access to the peer helpers. This included gaining a perspective of the breadth of transferrable skills they had developed through the project.

Peer helpers also enhanced course design. This is because peer helpers were able to provide an insider student’s perspective on my attempts to facilitate CEL within the course. For example, they drew on their previous experiences to comments on how specific structured
workshop activities assisted in their skill development before applying those skills to their CBR project. They were also able to comment on overall structure of the course, and make suggestions for example on tweaking deadlines to make the experience less stressful and thus more valuable for the students.

Another critical benefit of the CEL Peer Helper Unit in this course is provisions of additional training to peer helpers as they individually further develop their own skills over the course of the semester. For example, peer helper’s own observation skills become more critical and they become more confident communicators in a variety of settings, including within workshops, facilitator meetings and at the TLI conference. In addition, reintegration with course material enabled the peer helpers to develop a more refined understanding of qualitative research.

Peer Helper Perspectives on the Experience

Reflecting on the experiences from a peer helper perspective, we quickly realized that they could be considered at two different levels: the course and the individual peer helper. Benefits to the course ranged from direct support to the student to using their insider perspective to make recommended changes to the current course offering, whereas benefits to the peer helper focused on personal and professional skill development. Challenges to the course ranged from the novelty of our positions, to experimenting with hands off and hands on approaches to helping, while challenges to the peer helper focused on facilitating students learning and our own recall. Each of these is elaborated on below.

Course Benefits:

As peer helpers we were able to provide support to current students, based directly on our own experiences as students who had been there before. [Author 3] reflects how, as a student in
the course she would have liked to have received advice from other students who had taken on similar projects. This was one of the motivations for her to join the course as a peer helper. [Author 3] recalled when conducting research interviews that her group had experienced problems with recruiting participants. As a peer helper she was approached by a group who had a similar inquiry on what to do if they encountered a similar situation. [Author 3] was able to provide them with feedback and give them advice on what their group could do differently, in this case, using several methods of recruitment simultaneously in order to obtain a larger participant pool.

Most group work assessment involved focused attention on group dynamics. The peer helpers were able to focus their observations on this and share them with the workshop facilitators as well as provide suggestions to students. In this way, the peer helper served as another set of eyes and ears for the GTA who was not able to watch more than one group at a time. As an observer of group dynamics, the peer helpers were able to determine whether or not a group was on track, any issues they were having, and if the task was understood and being executed properly.

We were also able to serve as an unfiltered connection between students and facilitators. Since Peer helpers were in a role that did not involve grading, the students seemed to have felt more comfortable opening up to the peer helper than to the GTA. For example, when a group was stressed about meeting a deadline, they were more willing to talk about it with the peer helper than they were the GTA. In this case peer helpers were able to help diffuse the tension and calm the group members so that they were able to focus on the task at hand and not worry about issues beyond their control.

Peer helpers were able to use their experiences from the previous academic year to make alterations to the course. For example, there were a few changes made to the syllabus that were
different from when they had taken the course. These changes included creating earlier
deadlines for the ethics forms and the interview guide. This gave the students more time to
recruit participants and conduct interviews and code data. In addition, allowing the students to
hand in their final research report a week after the poster presentations allowed for the students
more time to refine their work and ease some of the stress that came with presenting and writing
the final report in the same week.

There were also some aspects of the course that did not change because they were
considered helpful to the students in preparing them for the research. For example, the coding
exercise was retained as a structured workshop activity because it was useful in reinforcing the
differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods. It also functioned as a way to
practice how best to organize and categorize data they were presented with. In addition, mock
interviews were also kept as a structured workshop activity for the students to practice writing
open ended questions, interviewing participants and observing the interview. These skills would
then be applied later on when the students conducted their in-depth interviews with project
participants.

*Peer Helper Benefits:*

The peer helpers note that the CEL peer helper position enabled them to reinforce what
they had learned and in essence served as review of their own learning. The experiential learning
component was beneficial for future research endeavours as well as refining transferable skills
useful in the workplace. The peer helpers demonstrated the benefits of this experiential learning
approach to students in the course who were contemplating continuing their education at the
graduate level. With respect to research skills, the peer helpers also note that their own
observation skills improved. The journaling exercise combined with the weekly meetings
enabled them to discuss what occurred in the previous workshop and to consider what to look for
in the upcoming workshop. An example of a transferable skill included an increase in their formal and informal communication skills. These were refined during workshops while engaging with students about the work they had been doing, as well as outside class in terms of communicating with GTAs, the instructor and with students they would sometimes see outside of class. Another transferable skill was an increased awareness of how group dynamics can change with time and that they are not static, as well as the diversity of approaches to group work. This enabled peer helpers to help assist with overcoming group dynamic challenges student groups faced.

Course Challenges:

One of the challenges that the course-based CEL peer helpers faced was in relation to the novelty of their position. The role of peer helper in this course had no guidelines and no written instructions. This made it difficult at first because peer helpers had to create our own roles, while not infringing on the role of the GTA and the instructor, as well as not infringing on the students projects. It was a delicate balance that took a few weeks to be realized. Not only was our own understanding of the role unclear, but the students also did not know how to respond to our presence in the room at the beginning.

At first the peer helpers role took a more of a hands-off approach simply observing the students in their groups and answering questions when asked. Halfway through the semester the Instructor asked the peer helpers to interact with the groups and ask them about their projects. This approach in hindsight was probably the better method to take with the groups, allowing the peer helpers to interact with the students on a more personal and informal basis, conversing with them on what they were working on, what was challenging, and how their projects were progressing overall.
Peer Helper Challenges:

As peer helpers we also had our own challenge related to facilitating learning while engaging in our own learning activities. For example, we quickly realized the importance of patience in our interactions with the other students, in order to give them space to learn. Rather than simply offering “answers,” we helped them create their own experiences to facilitate their learning. Another challenge, we faced as students was in terms of managing our own time. We served as peer helpers while taking a full course load, and so there was not always time to review what we had learned the previous year prior to meeting with students in their workshops.

Discussion and Conclusion

Racz and Zsuzka differentiate between peer helpers that are peers with respect to age (typically in academic settings) and peers with respect to similarities in experiences (typically in service settings). The peer helpers who were part of the CEL Peer Helper Unit are peers in both senses, in that they are similar in age to the students in the class as well they are there because of an explicit previous course experience with community engaged learning.

In speaking to individuals involved in other forms of peer helper programs, many of the benefits and challenges experienced by peer helpers are similar to those experienced in this course based CEL peer helper pilot. The differences between the course-based CEL peer helper pilot and other peer helper programs seem to be more in the integrated nature of the Pilot CEL Peer Helper Unit with the course itself. Desmarais, Evers, Hazelden, Shnarr and Whiteside showed that at the midpoint of their two year study, peer helpers demonstrated higher levels of

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skill development compared to non-peer helper students, particularly in terms of managing people and tasks and mobilizing innovation and change.5

The benefits of a course based CEL Peer Helper Unit exceed the challenges. Most of the challenges can be overcome with increased visibility of these course-based Peer Helper Units as well as increased training to help prepare peer helpers for their unique contributions. The benefits of Course Based Peer Helper Programs accrue to the students in the course, the instructor, the GTAs, as well as the peer helpers themselves.

The peer helper opportunity provides methods for undergraduates to bolster their curriculum vitae while generating opportunities to interact as a tutor and in a volunteer capacity. The peer helper Program provides a unique opportunity for selected undergraduate students to polish their observational, time management, and communication skills. The active engagement with faculty, GTAs, and fellow undergraduates aids in developing the aforementioned transferable skills. By participating in the course in a role separate from being a student in the course, peer helpers also gain insights in facilitating learning.

As a result of the positive experiences of this pilot, a CEL Peer Helper Unit consisting of two peer helpers was integrated into the Winter 2012 offering of one section of SOAN 3070: Qualitative and Observational Methods.

For others contemplating integrating peer helpers within courses, we could make the following recommendations:

1. This course-integrated type of Peer Helper Unit is most beneficial for courses where a complex set of factors makes additional supports useful (e.g., in this case the Community Engaged Learning, group work and experiential learning).

2. Ensure that the role of the Peer Helper Unit is clearly defined and clearly understood by the peer helper’s themselves, the students, and the GTAs. But also note that it takes time for this type of Peer Helper Unit to be fully integrated within a course.

3. Ensure that support structures are in place to facilitate the peer helper’s own learning objectives (e.g., weekly meetings, access to additional relevant training opportunities).

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Desmarais, Serge, Frederick Evers, Olivia Hazelden, Laurie Schnarr, and Brenda Whiteside. “Skill Objectives of the Peer Helper Program At the University of Guelph: Longitudinal Analysis. Post-Test 1 Report.” Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, The Role of Student Services in Promoting Educational Quality File 08/09, no.27 (2011).


