PEER LEARNING - FACILITATOR FOR IMPROVEMENT OF THE RESULTS AT THE EXAMS

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Abstract *Peer learning embodies diverse types and forms and it was extended in curricular areas and in contexts that may be applied outside the school. Considered as being among the most efficient learning strategies, peer learning is more and more encountered in colleges and universities. The possibility that the students learn by interacting with others, more than with the teacher, is a subject that rises the learning researchers' and practitioners' interest.*

The aim of this study was to probe the opinion of students from the Faculty of Letters that study the psycho-pedagogical program according the advantages of developing a pilot program of peer assisted learning destined to improve the results at exams. We have also been interested to learn whether and how students are involved in closed learning/working groups have the tendency to learn and retain more than a certain subject.

The results of the study show the fact that the students who learn in small groups, usually, find out more about what had been taught and memorize more than when the same content is presented in other training forms.

The benefits of using a peer learning program are felt at different levels: at the participants to the course level, at the students'-facilitators' level, at the faculty level, at the institution level.

Keywords*: peer learning, small groups learning, peer assisted learning program.*

Introduction

Peer learning embodies a few learning and teaching practices. Within the present pedagogical discussions one makes reference to terms as : "peer tutoring," "peer instruction," "cooperative or collaborative learning" (group work), and "peer editing".

Peer learning' has been described as a "… two-way reciprocal learning activity" (Boud, Cohen, Sampson, 2001), involving "... networks of learning relationships, among students and significant others" (Boud, Lee, 2005).

Within the Ministry Conference in Bucharest it was specified that:. Enlarging access to superior learning is a condition for the social and economic development.." and the Ministers agreed to „...adopt national measures in order to extend global access to quality superior learning." Ministers decided, at the same time, to intensify the efforts in order to sustain groups that are weakly represented, by developing the social dimension of the superior learning, reduce the inequity and offer adequate services for students, counselling and orientation, flexible learning routs and alternative ways to access, inclusively he recognition of prior studies. (Communication from Bucharest, 2012).

Also, ministers agreed to develop a volunteer system of peer-learning up to 2013, in the countries that ask for this. And not in the last places, they assumed to initiate a pilot program in order to promote peer-learning according the social dimension of superior learning, in order to help countries from EHEA space in their development, implementation and monitoring the policies that aim tis social dimension.

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Reciprocal learning has, arguably, always formed part of higher education. Such schemes in schools or Higher Education have usually aimed to improve student performance and are often motivated by concerns over 'underachievement' and targeted at those considered to be 'at risk' (Topping, 2001: 8). In recent decades, there have been initiatives in Europe, America and Australasia, and considerable research and literature has been published reporting benefits, especially for those in the role of mentor or peer learning leader (e.g. Galbraith ,Winterbottom, 2011; Parkinson, 2009; Stout, McDaniel, 2006).

In a wide sense, peer-learning is an approach that involve students as active participants in the learning process, enriches their learning experience, deals with problems and challenges from real world, creates a more interacting learning environment, encourages questions, discussions and debates, develops abilities (general and cognitive) from which students should beneficiate at their work place. Exchanging feed-back with someone who passed through similar experiences and shares similar responsibilities is ideal for students.

Conceptual delimitations

In the context of this present paper, peer assisted learning is:

- ✓ A formal system, similar to the mentored one, that allows students to help others with their proved knowledge in other for those to develop their abilities;
- ✓ After they beneficiated the training, students from the 2nd and the 3rd years action as facilitators for the program of peer assisted learning, organize and facilitate weekly study sessions for groups of students from the 1st year.
- ✓ The sessions are volunteer and destined to offer a secure and friendly place in order to help students to:
    - Rapidly adapt to the university life;
    - Improve they study customs;
    - Understand the course subjects, or one course unit, through group discussions;
    - Prepare for exams
- ✓ The content for peer assisted learning are based on materials from the course (worksheets, notes, textbooks)

Purpose of the Study

In order to support the 1st year students from the Faculty of Letters to integrate and adapt to the university environment, and mainly to develop their learning and study strategies as: exam and revision techniques, note-taking and essay writing skills it was developed a pilot and experimental of peer assisted learning. Peer assisted learning is an academic support programme for all students in the Faculty of Letters**,** which attending psycho-pedagogical studies program. Peer assisted learning is not only for students who are having difficulty at educational psychology, can be extended for everyone who wants to improve their grades and learn better ways to study and teaches life-long learning skills. In other words, Peer assisted learning is a program for those student wanting to improve their academic performance.

In the process of the Romanian students' initial training for a teaching career, educational psychology is a fundamental part of the psycho-pedagogical training, not only by its mainly formative role, but also by the weight that this subject holds within

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the psycho-pedagogical training curriculum of the Departments for the Teachers' Training in the Romanian universities.

The option for small group learning is justified in the first place by the fact that this is an efficient modality to learn, but it also represents an important factor to increase students' motivation.

Methodology and process

Participants and recruitment

The participants to the study were:

- Three groups of students from the Faculty of Letters 1st year who attend the courses of the psycho-pedagogical module and who chose for learning sessions of peer-assisted type.
- Three students-facilitators from the 2nd and 3rd year from the same faculty enrolled in the psycho-pedagogical module. The students-facilitators have been selected after some criteria among which: special results at the module disciplines in general, and in special at educational psychology, interest and involvement in the learning process, the capacity to communicate and leadership abilities, participation to the peer assisted learning courses.
- Two teachers from the psycho-pedagogical study program who teach education psychology.

In order to determine the perceptions of the participants in the study one used the semi structural interview.

Materials

The themes for the sessions of peer assisted learning have been selected taking into consideration the students' repeated requirements to receive help for: filling-in the psycho-pedagogical form, identifying the learning styles, identifying the communication aptitudes, identifying the predominant intelligence type, ways to stimulate creativity, identifying the temperament, identifying the character profile, ways to identify aptitudes, developing a cognitive style and an intellectual working style.

The peer assisted learning program scheme

The general scheme of the pilot program was developed and administrated by the two members of the didactic personnel and it included the following steps: assigning the subjects for the Peer assisted learning sessions, developing the materials for the peer assisted learning sessions, recruiting the peer assisted learning facilitators, developing and implementing the training program for the students-facilitators as well as the assessment of the program by students-learners as well as students-facilitators.

The peer assisted learning sessions were sessions of specific study, units that have taken place weekly for an hour (according to the students' schedule) and have been led by students-facilitators.

Students-facilitators are closer to students as concerns learning experience and "practically talk the same language" and they understand the challenges met by those who learn.

The peer assisted learning sessions focused on the elements that the students-learners desired to discuss and revise, on understanding the content of the course and prepare for the exams. The peer assisted learning sessions character was based on learning through cooperation and collaboration.

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Assessing the students-learners experience was obtained through an anonymous form of feed-back, the semi structural interview concerning the usefulness of the session, its impact on learning, understanding the subjects at the level of confidence, as well as whether students will participate to sessions recommended by other colleagues. The agreement of collecting and using the participants' feed-back data was obtained before collecting the data.

Students-facilitators were asked to fill-in anonymous assessment forms and, also, a short reflexive report after each session with the aim to reflect on their experience and their developed competences.

Results and findings

The article presents the preliminary results of experimenting with the peer assisted learning program. The interviewed students freely expressed their agreement to take part in the interview and to share their experience from the peer assisted learning sessions. Further on we offer a few significant examples for our study:

a) For the question: *Do you consider that the sessions have been useful*? A few students appreciated that:
   - *"The sessions have been very good and useful. I wouldn't change a thing in them."* (O.P., 20 years old, female)
   - *"Peer assisted learning is a good idea. We help each other to understand the concepts. We need to study, but I wouldn't do it on my own."* (B.T., 21 years old, male)

b) For the question: *Do you think that the session had a role in your learning for the education psychology discipline?* Students considered that:
   - *" Peer assisted learning makes a huge difference concerning my grades!"* (S.A., 21 years old, female)
   - *"I asked questions in peer assisted learning and I didn't feel embarrassed. It really helped me."* (D. G., 19 years old, male)

c) For the question *Do you consider that these session have increased your confidence in this discipline*? A few students think that:
   - *"An hour spent in a peer assisted learning session is equivalent to 3 to 4 hours of individual study."* (V. O., 21 years old, male)
   - *"I only wished to thank for the great program. If it hadn't been for peer assisted learning I would have given up, but with the help received now, I am sure I can pass the unity and stay enrolled."*(A.A., 20 years old, female)
   - *"A sure place for support! You learn to ask questions, discuss over the course content and you receive feed-back in a confidential and student-centred environment."*(T.C., 19 years old, female)

d) For the question *Do you think that the understanding of the learned themes has improved?*
   - *"The materials form the sessions and tutorials have been simplified and clarified during the peer assisted learning sessions and this helped me a lot."* (U. D., 21 years old, male)
   - *"I found the team reunions before the exam supportive and precious; it was a rich exchange of ideas and problems, challenges, successes and best practices."*(I.A., 20 years old, female)

e) For the question *Would you recommend these sessions to other colleagues*? The obtained answers are all affirmative. Communication, critical thinking and team work are the attributes that students bring into discussion and they consider these

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will be reported in all the aspects concerning university experience and in the future at the work place.

f) For the question *Will you participate at other sessions if they are organized*? The majority of students declared that they would be prepared to participate at further sessions as these contribute to improving their learning techniques, offers efficient learning instruments that can be used in all aspects of life.

According to the academic personnel and the students-facilitators' opinion, the peer assisted learning sessions also have directly observable effects as: increasing responsibility, participation, self-confidence and respect and motivation.

Without exception, all students have been more motivated, and this motivation has been raised across the entire program; students have been more eager to collaborate, their focus capacity increased and spoke spontaneously. Even students who at the beginning were more passive have become more involved in time. The responsibility for learning increased, each student assumed full responsibility for what and how much he learned. Each student was, at a certain point during the sessions, student, teacher, expert, assessor, etc. this multitude of roles increased even more their self-confidence and respect for colleagues.

Conclusions

This small study offers preliminary contributions and associated practice to peer-learning and shows the fact other similar studies would be useful.

The obtained results constitute important anchors to continue and extend the program to the level of other specialities within the University of Pitesti.

Furthermore, besides the proofs presented above concerning the value of learning from colleagues, during their interviews, the participants to the study emphasized a series of present benefits of such a program: *at the level of students learners* (it offers support and leading, social benefits, increasing the academic trust, a better communication, work team, solving problems, interpersonal abilities), *at the level of students-facilitators* (personal development, development of competences- leadership, interpersonal communication, work team, the opportunity to reflect, revise and re-assess, increase in the academic performance), *at the level of teachers* (offer support to students for a better preparation for courses and to keep up with course materials, form in students base elements of the work group, help creating the individual learning, facilitators offer feed-back on a regular base for the 1st year students concerning the course content), *at the level of faculty* (improving the study abilities for students, promoting the community spirit, offers financial support in order to increase the number of students, erases the age barriers between groups- helps developing a more coherent culture of the course), *at institutional level* (widens the students access to diverse organizations, reduces the school withdrawal).

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