
PEER COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AS A DELIVERY MECHANISM FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learners require ongoing support to develop their potentials. Peer collaborative learning (PCL) in distance education can enhance learning and teaching experiences, empower learners and peer leaders, and provide learner support. PCL can build the community culture of lifelong learning that is required to support national capacity building in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Central to the revised South African education system (implemented with the new democratic government in 1994) is the emphasis that education in South Africa ensures access to “lifelong education and training opportunities”, which will in turn contribute towards improving quality of life and building a democratic society (Asmal, 2002).

This emphasis also includes people being able to apply learning in a variety of situations and circumstances and to grow, educationally, throughout their lives. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) determined critical outcomes (generic outcomes) which inform all teaching and learning. The SAQA Act (1995) developed the integrated National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which embodies all registered unit standards, credits, and qualifications. A fundamental goal of the NQF is to create a mechanism to enable and to promote lifelong learning through the establishment and maintenance of a record of prior learning for each learner.

In terms of open distance learning (ODL) in South Africa, the “Criteria for Quality Distance Education in South Africa” refers to the criteria for academic support – particularly learner support – as “‘communities of learning’ in which the individual learner thinks and solves problems with others engaged in similar tasks. This is facilitated through a range of learner support mechanisms – peer support sessions...” (Department of Education, 1998).

What is PCL’s contribution to lifelong learning? Knapper and Cropley (2000) are of the opinion that “deliberate learning” is essential in order to achieve lifelong learning. The characteristics of

such ‘deliberate learning’ include that it should be intentional and reflect specific goals (which is also the reason for engaging in learning), and that acquired knowledge be retained and applied.

How is PCL linked to lifelong learning? PCL is a methodology for learner support, and an educational approach. It is not a remedial action, but rather a mechanism or delivery tool to assist learners, through a process, with cognitive and social-development objectives to acquire skills towards lifelong learning. According to Arendale (1994), a fundamental ethos of supplementary instruction (SI) (the earliest peer-type program) is that it targets “high-risk” courses rather than high-risk learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature indicates that peer-type learning has a long history in some countries. SI in the USA began as early as 1973. Similar “peer learns from peer” programs were introduced and gained popularity in United Kingdom universities during the 1990s (Donelan, 1995; Bidgood, 1994). In all instances, the literature (Donelan, 1999; Coe, McDougall & McKeown, 1999) indicates that this learner-centred learning approach has been beneficial and worthwhile for both the learners who voluntarily attended and the leaders who managed and facilitated the sessions. In both the US and the UK, the initial, small, pilot programs have been expanded to include other high-risk subjects, other faculties and other institutions. Even a cursory reading of peer-learning research indicates that the benefits of peer projects (both for learners and leaders) have been considerable. This is not to say, however, that programs have always run smoothly or without problems.

PCL could become a revolutionary approach that can support the objectives of the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001) as well as the Skills Development Act (1998) in South Africa. In this country, distance education is fast becoming one of the most popular choices for tertiary training and study. Distance education is more affordable and flexible, and is an option for already-employed learners. The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) in South Africa states that institutions have a “moral and educational responsibility to ensure that they have effective programs (learner support) in place to meet the ... learning needs of the students” (Department of Education, 2001, p. 27-31). The document continues to state that learner support should include a “variety of delivery mechanisms”. The mission statement of the former Technikon SA itself states that the provision of effective, decentralised learner support is a central component of its service provision. It is clear from these national directives and this mission statement that a variety of delivery mechanisms should be available to learners. Peer collaborative learning is one such practical mechanism that is being introduced to advance education towards lifelong learning that is flexible, accessible, and reflective in nature.

In line with world trends, South African institutions have now to cope with a new and constantly changing education environment. They are being pressured by government, business, and learners themselves to provide easily accessible, cost-effective, wide-ranging education to ensure job readiness and competitiveness to meet the demands of an increasingly technological economy. Society now demands a skilled workforce that may need continuous re-training of its members if they are to find employment. It is for this reason that the concept of the lifelong learner has become so crucial. Equally, learners’ demands have also changed. They now require of their institution convenient, cost-effective, and flexible training and retraining opportunities that are delivered in a professional, service-oriented manner (Jacobs, 2002).

The University of Southern Africa (UNISA) (newly merged), as the largest distance education institution in South Africa, provides access and flexibility to lifelong learners as well as lifelong learning opportunities. With 24 UNISA (former Technikon SA) learner-support

offices scattered throughout South Africa as regions, it is seen as an ideal infrastructure for delivery of learning, and it is aligned with the NPHE (2001) directive, “Developing a national network of learning centres, which would facilitate access and co-ordinate learner support systems.” These decentralised offices (learning centres) provide access to various learner support services and technological equipment and are utilised for the PCL program. The face-to-face contact eliminates the feeling of isolation associated with distance learning. The PCL process of collaboration is highly interactive and participative. Interaction with fellow learners (peers) has always been regarded as a source of learning. Peer interaction is an important contributor to cognitive and social development.

METHODOLOGY

In Gauteng, South Africa, we have implemented a peer collaborative learning program as a learning strategy aimed at supplementing other types of learner support (such as print material, tutor network, and contact sessions). PCL involves learners learning from one another. For this program, specific, high-risk (i.e., high-failure rate) subjects have been identified and targeted. Senior learners, who have already passed these subjects, are selected to become leaders, and once the leader has been trained in basic facilitation skills and group dynamics, sessions can commence. Sessions are facilitated by the leader, who directs and guides the various group members towards comprehension, understanding, and learning. These trained peer leaders regularly meet groups of learners and facilitate discussion and learning.

Leader training is structured and delivered according to a PCL training manual that has been developed. The manual was compiled, based largely on international best practice for supplemental instruction. Training was contextualised for the South African distance-education environment, with it being divided into theory and application; the training includes sections of facilitation skills development, techniques to handle groups and personalities (group dynamics), and practical group exercises and activities.

Sessions are structured according to the Standard Operating Procedures manual (SOP), to ensure standardisation for multi-regional delivery. Every lesson comprises components of long-term exam planning, generic learner

support, subject-specific objectives and material, and homework and revision exercises. Evaluation and reflection forms (as well as claims and reports) have to be completed by PCL leaders and submitted after each session.

Initially, the progress of the group and the performance of the leader require careful monitoring. The subject content (concepts, areas of difficulty, etc.) covered by the leaders is determined by the relevant academics of those subjects. Leaders begin the two-hour sessions by introducing learners to items of a generic nature; for instance, the requirements of studying by distance education, time management, and study skills. Thereafter, sessions focus on the specific subject matter (guided by academic input). A variety of group exercises to encourage discussion and participation are used. Sessions are concluded with a homework assignment, which is to be completed for the following meeting. Fifteen structured sessions are scheduled throughout the academic cycle according to the critical phases of the academic year.

Attendance by the learners is voluntary, but erratic attendance is discouraged and their commitment to the total number of sessions (15) is requested, as is their participation in all activities and the completion of self-study, homework exercises. For conducting each two-hour training session, leaders receive a small remuneration of one hundred Rand. This is paid to cover expenses.

The following elements are prerequisites for a structured PCL session.

- Positive interdependence – learners in the small group (maximum of seven) share mutual goals and understand the concept of collaboration in order to achieve objectives rather than competitiveness for individual success.
- Face-to-face interaction – classroom layout should promote collaborative learning, interaction, and participation by sharing information, and by assisting and encouraging each other's efforts.

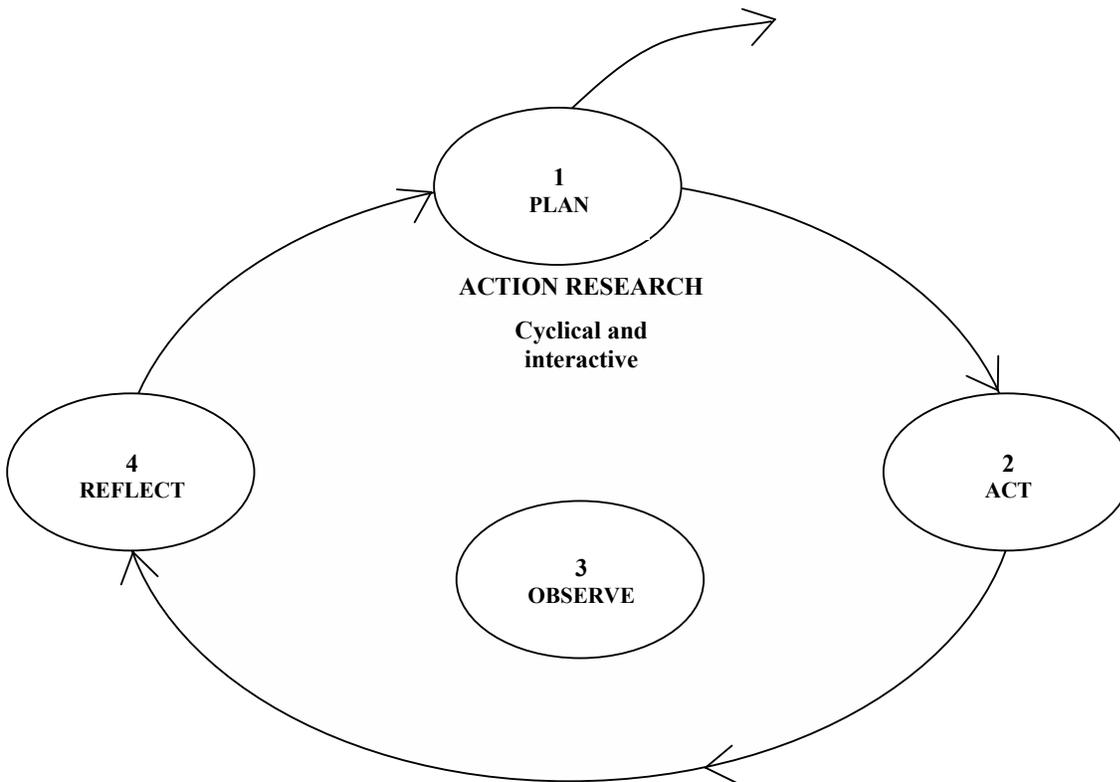


Figure 1. Cyclic process of lifelong learning.¹

¹ From “The holistic clinic model: ALAR the key ingredients to change and development.,” by G. Lyttle 2003, *Action Learning and Action Research Journal*, 8(1), p. 5. Copyright 2003 ALAR Journal. Reprinted with Permission.

- Individual and group accountability – the group is responsible for achieving results and goals and each member must be accountable for contributing his or her share of the work.
- Interpersonal and small group skills are enhanced; learners are required to learn academic subject matter as well as the small-group skills required to function as part of a group (teamwork).
- Group processing – this is structured by assigning activities and tasks to achieve academic acquisition and development. PCL leaders also monitor groups and give feedback on how well groups work together (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998).

PCL is being run as an action-research project in Gauteng, the most densely populated province in South Africa. As the project continues, it is simultaneously being evaluated. Zuber-Skerritt (1992) explains how action research is emancipatory in that it “aims at changing the system itself or those conditions which impede desired improvement...” Action research “emphasizes process over a specific content. It recognizes change as a continuous, cyclical, lifelong learning process, rather than a series of programs. It is based on team collaboration, coordination, double-loop learning in order to effect real change and emancipation” (Zuber-Skerritt as cited in Lyttle, 2003). Figure 1 illustrates the action-research process.

The objective of such research is to constantly evaluate data as they become available, with a view to correcting or improving the program and/or its procedures. Learning is not a static event – it is a process. While the project is running, data are continually being collected and analysed in order to evaluate the success of and benefits for learners that participate, and the benefits (if any) for the leaders, and to identify any recurrent problem areas or trends that might indicate the need for modification. This has meant close adherence by all participating offices (four at present) to the same training manual (for leaders), and the submission of standardised report and feedback documents, to ensure reliable data collection.

The PCL intervention was designed and developed around critical phases for learners in an academic year (see figure 2). The PCL intervention sessions were proactively scheduled to prepare learners in advance for academic

challenges in each subject and to assist them towards optimum progress. With such an approach, the academic institution could benefit with improved pass rates, throughput rates, and retention. Learners are empowered to complete and submit assignments on time, which allows them examination admission (acquisition of academic knowledge).

THE CRITICAL PHASE INTERVENTION STRATEGY

The critical phase intervention strategy was determined by the following factors: One of the strategic goals of the institution states that student retention and improved throughput rates are of primary importance. The successful continued (financial) viability of the institution is endangered by the high drop-out rate of learners. Consequently, proactive support strategies, which aim at retaining the learner in the system, are essential.

Secondly, the institution has an open-access policy. Anyone, who has achieved a matric (school-leavers certificate), regardless of grades obtained, can apply and be accepted into tertiary study. The result is a learner body of widely differing levels of ability. Weaker learners are often the first to drop out. Any learner support that provides assistance to such learners will assist them to continue to study (and prevent further dropping out).

As a result of South Africa’s historical situation, many students have experienced an inferior quality of schooling (both inferior teachers and teaching). Research has shown that the former Technikon SA predominantly draws learners who achieve results of between 33-50 percent in their school leavers certificate (Dr. F. Dresselhaus – personal communication). This means that learners could be categorized as “weak” and in urgent need of additional assistance if they are not to become contributors to the drop-out statistics.

The majority of learners who enter tertiary distance education studies are second or even third language speakers of English. Yet the language of education is English. This immediately places them at a disadvantage. Although they may be reasonably fluent in verbal communication, they do not have the necessary CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) to cope with academic reading material and to sufficiently understand, process, and make sense of academic writing.

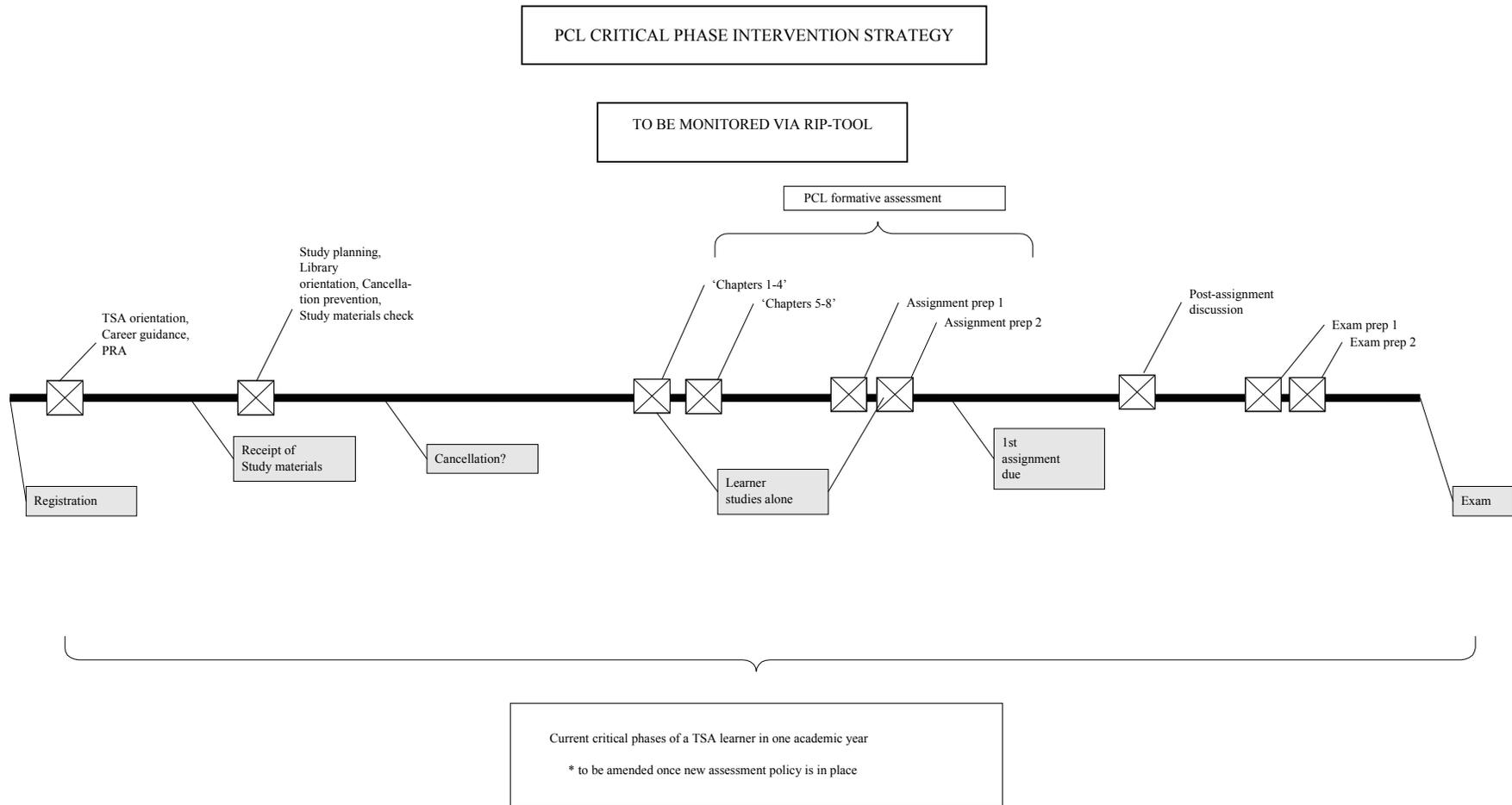


Figure 2. PCL critical phase intervention strategy.

Finally, financial considerations are often the primary reason why people select distance education. The result is that many students are not truly the self-directed learners that are required to achieve success with self-study. In addition, the present curriculum on offer to learners does not have at its core the fundamental philosophy of interactive participation. This could only be provided by learner-support intervention strategies.

All the above factors contribute to the reality that many of our learners urgently need learner support initiatives and interventions, if they are to succeed with tertiary education. PCL is an attempt to pilot one such support initiative.

The “critical phases” were determined by a survey of data, collected over the past few years that indicated, at what stage during the academic year (between registration and successful completion of exams) learners were most likely make the decision to discontinue with their studies. An examination of figure 2 will make this clear. There are certain peak points, such as after receipt of an assignment and failure to attain exam entrance, when learner drop-out is particularly high. Sessions were scheduled to proactively attend to the progress of learners.

PCL project participants will be writing exams during May / June 2004 and learners are preparing for exams during the last sessions. Preliminary feedback consists of negative and positive remarks. Positive feedback includes positive remarks from students who regularly attended sessions, to negative feedback of erratic attendees and lack of commitment by some learners.

Regional academic managers are responsible for the implementation of PCL according to the Standard Operating Procedures, to monitor the project on site, and to execute quality audits. The source documentation (attendance lists, lesson plans, evaluation documents) are sent to the Academic Development Centre (ADC) where the project leader will record and analyse data to determine the impact of the project. Project results will be published after the availability of the exam results.

CONCLUSION

Learning is enhanced through the processes of interaction and collaboration. The culture of collaboration among peers is critical to a culture of lifelong learning. This PCL project is one such delivery mechanism of learner support to facilitate lifelong learning. PCL as an educational tool can compensate for inadequate learner support structures in the distance-learning context.

The advantage for distance education in South Africa, where learners are scattered over considerable geographical distances, is that groups can meet anywhere and at any time (access and flexibility). Using computer and communication technology, academic input and monitoring of a leader from the nearest regional office would enable a national “roll-out” to regional centres in decentralised areas.

PCL can be applied and implemented in a range of ways, and it is currently piloted, promoted, and recommended to first-year students. Student participants, PCL leaders, and staff involved with the project are benefiting in various ways from the PCL project participation. Finally, the fundamental philosophy of engagement enables a cooperative approach to learning that enhances understanding and thinking skills and in the process enhances the total learning experience of learners.

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MEDIA AND MEDIATION: INFORMATION LITERACY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LGBTQ CULTURAL LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I discuss using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy so the needs of LGBTQ Canadians, especially teachers and students, can be met. I link this work to lifelong learning and I use the Alberta Teachers' Association's *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* website as an example of how this work can be done.

INTRODUCTION

My political and pedagogical project, which guides my teaching, community service, and research, is focused on rearticulating education for citizenship in Canada within the context of a contemporary multicultural society where LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) citizens have become increasingly visible in our cultural mosaic while still being denied the rights and privileges of full citizenship. My ongoing research, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, has this primary purpose: to study welfare-and-work issues for LGBTQ teachers in Canada's provinces and territories. In keeping with my political and pedagogical project, this study investigates the need for every Canadian to further question identity, difference, pluralism, equity, diversity, and inclusion as integral sociocultural dimensions of Canadian citizenship. These aspects of civility affect life, learning, and work. In schools as teachers' workplaces, teachers work at the intersection of the moral and the political. In this milieu LGBTQ teachers have

had to separate the personal (the sex-and-gendered self) from the professional (the educator acting *in loco parentis*). This is still the case for most teachers because, as my research indicates, significant efforts in Canadian law and legislation to advance the rights and privileges of LGBTQ Canadians have not translated into full accommodation for us in education and culture. Thus, with the support of a Centre for Research on Literacy Research Fellowship from my university, I have incorporated the following focus into my research: to use information literacy to build cultural literacy around LGBTQ citizens and their issues.

I begin this essay by discussing the importance of information literacy as an enabler of lifelong learning. I discuss using information literacy to build LGBTQ cultural literacy so the needs of LGBTQ Canadians, especially teachers and students, can be met. I use the Alberta Teachers' Association's *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* website as an example of how this work can be done.