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Capturing Community Knowledge: An AAP Report

Created by PLFs, for PLFs

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Capturing Community Knowledge: An AAP Report

Introduction

This project was born out of a desire to see continuous growth within AAP. It is a work of love for our community and respect for our incredible PLFs who work every day to uplift their peers and contribute to our betterment as individuals and as a community.

Through conversations with AAP staff across departments, as well as PLFs from most disciplines, we have created the following toolkit aimed for both new and continuing PLFs to draw from in their journey to crafting their unique facilitation styles. Rather than being prescriptive, we recognize that each course, professor, and quarter comprises different contexts that require PLFs to be flexible. Yet, many ideas have been developed over many years of collective experience that may be helpful across common situations.

Overall, we found that PLFs greatly enjoy their work. They believe in their efficacy and the AAP mission. Comments like “this is the best job on campus” were ubiquitous. This motivation and culture directly contributes to the incredible diversity of strategies that you will find in this document. However, new PLFs can sometimes feel intimidated and underconfident. Commonly reported challenges include lack of confidence, low participation, and fulfilling our organizational mission of creating a non-hierarchical space. Still, we must avoid a deficit-based lens when examining these challenges. PLFs demonstrated deep empathy when identifying underlying causes. When discussing low participation, one PLF stated: “Maybe they are shy to get the wrong answer”, rather than jump to conclusions about lack of motivation. I hope that by collecting the testimonies of over 35 PLFs represented here, we can perpetuate the valuable insights that our AAP community members have learned about themselves and each other.

Many thanks to Bianca Muonekwu, Dr. Alice Ho, and the 2021-22 PLF cohort for your input, which constituted the entire content of this report. Thank you also to Dr. Ifeoma Amah for your support.

In gratitude to the PLF community, which has given me and others so much,



Karen Yi, Psychology 100A PLF 2021-22

Objective

To capture strategies developed, disseminated, and adopted by the PLF community in order to guide both onboarding and ongoing training, so that future PLFs may perform their work with more confidence and skill.

Suggested means of using this guide during either Week 0 training or discipline meetings include:

- Choose a topic to focus on and review all strategies listed for that topic, inviting more suggestions from PLFs
- Use the Toolkit to troubleshoot issues that PLFs report as they navigate their sessions throughout the year
- Roleplay common challenging situations and try out different strategies for addressing them

At a glance

28
challenges identified

Most common challenge:

Low participation
(mentioned by 47% of respondents)*

60
strategies reported

Most common strategy:

Discuss life outside of session
(mentioned by 28% of respondents)*

*Most likely, more PLFs will agree with these statements if asked; statistics reflect only the respondents who explicitly mentioned these concepts in their statements.

Disclosures

The main researcher was employed as an active Peer Learning Facilitator for two academic quarters prior to the start of this project, and was compensated at the normal rate for completing this work. No other potential conflicts of interest are reported.

Toolkit

Here are some common ways that PLFs connect strategies to challenges. Use this page as inspiration to address some challenges that you anticipate or have experienced.

Please note: due to space constraints, the following infographic includes only those challenges and strategies reported by more than one PLF.

Challenges

- Safe space
- Creating non-hierarchical space
- Sessions are too large
- Feeling unprepared or unconfident
- PLF burnout
- PLF needs practice
- Running over time
- Adapting to different professors
- Low participation
- Low attendance
- Post-test slump
- Building community
- Over-focus on grades
- External factors
- College-level study skills
- Gauging understanding
- Self-directed learning
- Ambiguous content
- Exam preparation
- Varied learning needs
- Behind on classwork
- Confusing instructor
- Achieving deep understanding

Issues

- Inclusion
 - Does each peer have equal chance to participate?
- PLF needs
 - Are PLFs' nonacademic needs met?
- Engagement
 - Are peers being challenged to participate?
- Peer needs
 - Are peers' nonacademic needs met?
- Academic
 - Are peers given the tools to succeed academically?

Strategies

- Point out response options
- Peer collaboration
- Self-disclosure
- Calling on a peer
- Anonymous polls
- Admit you don't know
- Don't rush
- Have fun!
- Prepare in advance
- Let it pass
- Emphasize it's OK to be uncertain
- Embrace awkward silence
- Verbal encouragement
- Strong first session
- Have peers explain their answers
- Conversational style
- Discuss life outside session
- End-of-session mini office hours
- Checking in
- Teaching
- Individual recognition
- Resource center
- Validate rants
- Previewing lecture content
- Groupchat
- Post-test recovery session
- Affirmations
- Informal feedback
- Use practice questions
- Real-life examples
- Co-creating agenda
- Open-ended/critical questions
- Definitions
- Split up and rejoin
- Diagrams
- Send resources after
- Multiple instructional modes
- Compare techniques
- Writing help
- Role switching
- Style
- Skim readings

Recommendations

During the research process, some common themes emerged that PLF staff and supervisors can consider incorporating into future improvement efforts.

Collaborate with peer counselors

PLFs know that an important component of the AAP experience is getting socioemotional support beyond just academic support. Devoting 1 hour of annual training to a co-training between PLFs and peer counselors will help members of each department learn what the other has to offer. One possibility is to devote 15 minutes for each department to learn about the other department, and 20 minutes of breakout rooms where PLFs and peer counselors can discuss ways to coordinate their services.

Consider reinstating winter peer evaluations

Many PLFs seemed to be unclear about how they were performing, especially during the first 1-2 quarters. Feedback from coworkers may provide a less intimidating experience than feedback from supervisors. To lessen pressure even further, feedback from a coworker from outside of one's discipline should be considered as well.

Convert focus-group questions into discipline exercises

It was evident throughout the focus groups that many PLFs were learning new strategies in the moment. Discipline meetings are great opportunities for PLFs to bond, but some structured exercises might help PLFs share their techniques with others.

Incorporate scenarios involving common challenges into hiring interviews

Now that we have more insight into challenges most commonly faced among PLFs in the real world, we can make our hiring practices reflect even more accurately the skills and characteristics that successful, supportive PLFs need on the job.

Update the AAP website

Anecdotally, many current PLFs are unclear as to what populations, exactly, AAP serves. Information about AAP's mission, history, pedagogical approach, and demographics are missing from the site, but is available in previous Training Manuals (2002).

Reconsider the three-strike drop policy

One PLF mentioned that they are aware of AAP's so-called three-strike policy, but that carrying it out feels incongruous to AAP's non-hierarchical structure: "if you miss more than three [sessions] I might have to drop you - I've never done it because of the dynamic [that this would create between the PLF and the peer]". Anecdotally, this sentiment is widespread. Alternate strategies of addressing chronic absences should be explored in order to maintain our organization's non-hierarchical model. Yet we should maintain the spirit of the Training Manual: "We do not offer drop-in tutoring because we think it leads to 'band-aid' tutoring; it offers too little too late" (2002).

Future Directions

This project represents the work of one researcher over the course of ten weeks. Many, many improvements can be made to extend this project in the future.

Update the database

Because of staffing limitations, not every discipline was interviewed. Future iterations should consult the ESCP and Math disciplines.

Conduct in-person focus groups

Some advantages of in-person focus groups may include: greater likelihood for participants to build off of each other's testimonies (i.e. more conversational atmosphere). Disadvantages include: greater barriers to participation, intimidation of in-person interaction, loss of anonymity.

Create mixed focus groups

Best-practices guidelines for focus groups suggest that certain group dynamics encourage full honesty, including: groups of strangers (i.e. PLFs from other disciplines), same-gender and/or same-race groups, etc.

Discuss broad results of this study with other education entities on campus

Although AAP Peer Learning is unique in many ways, several other education organizations on campus have similar missions and values to PLF and could potentially have great use for the findings outlined in this project.

Replicate the study with IRB approval for journal publication

Similar to the above, many similar empowerment programs in higher-education institutions nationwide may benefit from and have suggestions for this project.

Begin designing ways to implement the project's findings

Much more work is needed to translate the basic findings in this report into more comprehensive training exercises.

Interview AAP members and non-AAP members who are part of AAP target communities

This project can only report information that PLFs know. From anecdotal experience in hiring interviews, AAP members have their own ideas for how to improve the program, but may not feel that they are in a position to give the feedback directly to their PLFs, likely because of the familiar nature of the PLF-peer relationship. Furthermore, in many of the recorded statements, PLFs reported wanting to know the reasons behind common challenges, such as low participation, in order to better address them. Finally, in light of decreased PLF session enrollment across recent years, we lack information about why some peers are choosing not to participate in PLF at all.

Appendix: Methods

The contents of this report represent the viewpoints of 38 PLFs across the Psychology, Econ/Management, Life Sciences, English, Social Sciences, and Chemistry disciplines. Before the interviews, each participant was provided with an informational form explaining the goals of the study and their rights as voluntary participants.

Each discipline was interviewed online (through Zoom) during their weekly discipline meeting for about 30-45 minutes. Focus groups were voluntary and fully compensated. Participants reserved the right to review and remove their own records, and to leave the session, at any time. In the interest of privacy, only initials were recorded (not names); identifying information was available only to the researcher (Karen). All data was transcribed in field-note form and not recorded verbatim. This project was not informed by existing scientific literature and will not be published as systematic research.

Questions posed to PLFs included:

1. Describe in a few sentences what your experience as a PLF has been like so far.
2. Think back to your first quarter as a PLF. What are some strategies you've adopted or invented as a PLF since you began, that you want to share to future PLFs?
3. What does a successful session look like, and what specific steps do you take to get there?
4. What does an unsuccessful session look like, and what changes have you made to ensure that the next session more closely matches your definition of success?

Sometimes, follow-up questions were asked as topics came up, in order to fully explore specific topics. Follow-up questions were not prepared beforehand. Most participants were also offered a feedback form asking about their experiences and suggestions for improving future interviews. For the full project proposal, information sheet, and interview script, please view the following folder: <https://tinyurl.com/plfcckdrive>.

After the interviews, the researcher reviewed, inductively developed and applied codes, and entered the data into a database (link to database: <https://tinyurl.com/plfcck>). Three codes were applied: first, individual verbal statements were organized into unitary concepts, such as "practice questions" or "low attendance"; second, concepts were categorized as either *challenges* or *strategies*; finally, broader themes, such as "inclusion" and "engagement", were inductively drawn from the concepts. In particular, the "issues" reported in the Toolkit are entirely conjectured by the researcher and do not have any particular scientific implications.

For the full project notes and any additional inquiries, please contact Karen Yi at notkarenyi@gmail.com.

Appendix: References

Please note: Many references were obtained from the AAP Research, Assessment, and Evaluation (RAE) division.

Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group. (2005). Eliot & Associates. https://irep.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/98/2016/05/Trinity_Duke_How_to_Conduct_a_Focus_Group.pdf

Social Sciences Lab Training Manual. (2002). Academic Advancement Program Tutorial Center.