Chapter 11
Enhancing the 21st Century Learning Experience: Enabling Learners

Fay Patel
Monash University, Malaysia

Fadhliyansah Saipul
Monash University, Malaysia

Regina Chan
Monash University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT
Higher education institutions have made considerable effort to develop generic centrally based and course integrated learning skills intervention programs to enhance student learning. Various student learning skills development interventions have been implemented in the global learning space to respond to the diverse learning needs of undergraduate and postgraduate learners. The existing learning skills development framework was expanded to include the newly introduced Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) to enable learners to learn effectively. The authors present an overview of the PASS program as a student centric learning initiative to enable student driven learning. The chapter highlights the challenges and benefits of promoting PASS as an integrated learning skills development approach. A reflective review of the different perspectives on learning skills development suggests that learners benefit from a number of effective strategies within a peer assisted study session to enable them to take responsibility for their learning.


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INTRODUCTION

Learning and teaching challenges in higher education continue to bring new dilemmas and areas of concern for institutional teams and academics. Of note are a long list of concerns about enhancing student learning skills development across all year levels from undergraduate to post graduate level. The list includes critical thinking skills, creativity, academic integrity, English language competency, research skills and information technology search and application skills. In view of these concerns and challenges higher education institutions develop learning skills frameworks to respond to the needs of the university community in context. In addition to the existing variation of learning skills development programs at most institutions, the peer mentoring and discipline integrated programs have found favor in international higher education.

In exploring ways in which to consolidate the existing learning skills development programs and to expand their reach via new approaches to enhancing learning skills development, the Monash University Malaysia team of professional and academic staff formed collaborative partnerships. In doing so they began with an assessment of existing skills development programs from the ground up and attempted to consolidate these into a campus wide learning and teaching enhancement framework. The PASS program is a newly introduced program (first implemented in Semester 2, 2015) that extends the support of the learning skills advisory team and operates on a Unit integrated level across disciplines to provide coaching, advice and training to first year student cohorts in particular.

This chapter draws on the experience of the campus community in contributing to the design and implementation of the peer assisted learning enhancement program in particular as a holistic approach to enable learners to take responsibility for their learning. Adopting a reflective analysis of the concerns and challenges among learner cohorts and instructors, the chapter identifies effective strategies to build and maintain learner responsibility.

The chapter begins with an overview of the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program and situates it in context. Recommendations are made for the effective implementation of learning skills development that is situated within an inclusive framework with the aim of enabling learners. Focus in the chapter is on enabling learners to take responsibility for learning so that they can sustain their skills as part of their lifelong learning experience. PASS is one solution, among many, to enhance learning skills development. As we seek solutions to respond appropriately and innovatively to the growing list of concerns in learning design, Biggs and Tang (2011, p. xx), remind us that “solutions will not be found in learning a whole new bag of teaching tricks”. However they are “likely to be found in reflecting on your teaching problems” and finding ways to handle them within a departmental and/or disciplinary context. The authors concur and suggest that the recommendations be analyzed from a discipline perspective.

In the next section, an overview is presented of the PASS program as it is applied to the Monash Malaysian campus context. The PASS program targets courses that are ‘at risk’ and does not target ‘students at risk’. In the Monash Malaysian campus context, courses are referred to as units. Schools and unit coordinators (course coordinators) are expected to identify ‘units at risk’ based on the complexity of the disciplinary concepts and the end of semester student evaluation of first year level units that fall below the institutional norm over several semesters. In placing the PASS program in context, a short overview is presented from its inception to current practice as it is adapted and implemented on the Malaysian campus.
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