

## Student Perceived Benefits of Peer-Assisted Instruction

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### Introduction

All too often, students enter a classroom, take a seat, listen to a lecture and leave without ever having engaged in what Bloom would consider higher order thinking skills (Bloom, 1984). Students remain unmotivated, disconnected and cognitively disengaged (Brophy, 2004). The 1998 Boyer Commission highlighted the instructors role in the engagement deficit in college classrooms by stating, “Some of their instructors are likely to be badly trained or even untrained teaching assistants who are groping their way toward a teaching technique; some others may be tenured drones who deliver set lectures from yellowed notes, making no effort to engage the bored minds of the students in front of them” (p. 6). One of the suggested changes of the Boyer Commission (1998) was the implementation of learner-centered instruction.

### Theoretical Foundation

Learner-centered instruction (LCI), broadly defined, is the attempt to structure learning in a manner that is active, collaborative, relevant, and supportive of the learner (Thompson, Licklider, & Jungst, 2003; Zophy, 1982). McCombs (2003) defined the heart of learner-centered instruction as, “putting learners first” (p. 94). Chickering and Gamson (1999) developed a set of seven principles useful in the education of undergraduates. Walczyk and Ramsey (2003) believed these seven principles directly apply to learner-centered instruction. In 1999, Chickering and Gamson (p. 76) stated,

It said that good practice in undergraduate education: encourages student-faculty contact, encourages cooperation among students, encourages active learning, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

One aspect of LCI is the use of peer-assisted instruction in the classroom. Peer-assisted instruction, as defined by Boud, Cohen, & Sampson (1999), “refers to the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher” (p. 413-414). In describing some of the positive effects of peer interaction, Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) stated, “Peer interactions, particularly those that extend and reinforce what happens in the academic program, appear to influence positively knowledge acquisition and academic skill development during college” (p. 121).

### Methodology

The purpose of this research was to examine student perceptions of peer-assisted instruction. Specifically, this research was intended to highlight the thoughts, feelings, and

reflections of students engaged in peer-assisted instruction. The guiding research question for this grounded theory qualitative study was:

*RQ1: What were the student thoughts and attitudes relating to peer-assisted instruction?*

Participants in this qualitative research study included 23 freshman and sophomore students engaged in peer-assisted instruction in an introductory teaching course. The researchers conducted detailed contextual and thematic document analysis on student reflections of peer-assisted instruction. In an effort to ensure research validity and reliability, both researchers worked independently, thus allowing for a triangulation of all data.

### Results to Date

Overall, the participants indicated positive support for the peer-assisted instruction. “Peer teaching opened my eyes to see how hard every lesson is to make.” “I found peer teaching to be rewarding.” “I recommend continuing the peer teaching program with classes in the future.” “Peer teaching opened my eyes to see...how unappreciative I am towards my teachers.” “To me it has been beneficial, and...I feel it [peer-assisted instruction] will also help others learn.” “I would have to say that it was a success.” “I am now more familiar with...how to engage students in learning” “I have taken my first step into the lifestyle of an educator”

The students also felt that peer-assisted instruction was beneficial to themselves and their classmates. “I feel that it teaches more to the students, because they are not hearing a lecture from the same old professor.” “They [peers] were genuinely interested and wanted to share their opinion.” “Having students teach gives it a fresh outlook and a creative take on material.”

### Conclusions/Implications

Peer-assisted instruction allows students to express themselves, participate in their own learning, and further engage in a course. In this research study, the student participants expressed positive support for the cognitive learning and classroom atmosphere created through peer-assisted instruction. The participants used terms of “engagement, creativity, and “fresh outlook” to describe their thoughts relating to peer-assisted instruction. Results indicate that students experience a positive change when engaging in peer-assisted instruction. In light of this apparent positive change, and considering the Boyer Commission report (1988), one must ask, what benefits are the students receiving from instructor-centered courses?

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