

B3: Peer Learning – Mental Health Perspectives

1. Background information		
Strand	A: Black British students	
	B: Disability/Mental Health students	X
Topic	Peer Learning (Mental Health Perspectives)	
Specific research question	What are some examples of peer learning/support across Cambridge, and what are the most effective to support students' mental health and academic performance?	
Student co-researchers	Nat Abbott, Education, 3 rd Year, Lucy Cavendish	
	Lucas Pringle, English, 2 nd Year, Gonville and Caius	
	Karan Patel, PBS, 2 nd Year, Wolfson	

Executive summary

This project investigated an educational activity that students identified as a cause of both support and anxiety for students with mental health conditions: peer learning. Cambridge is highly regarded for the opportunities for personal learning experiences, especially within undergraduate supervisions which involve a supervisor and very small groups of students. A less formal peer learning occurs in Colleges, where 'college families' are a traditional arrangement where more senior students are allocated as 'parents' to peer mentor more junior students. College families provide holistic support, including social as well as academic support, which can be crucial for students with mental health conditions.

These two approaches to peer learning are very different – one more formally structured within academic setting, and the other more informally structured within the College setting. However, they both have a significant impact on both the learning experiences and mental health of students. While supervisions, and other types of formal peer learning, provide structure to the learning experience, they are not always the most inclusive or accessible learning environments. On the other hand, informal peer learning initiatives, such as College families, might feel more supportive, but a lack of structure may not contribute to academic performance.

We explored the different types of formal and informal peer learning which exist within Cambridge; considering how effective these are according to our student peers, and whether they are considered beneficial or detrimental to their academic performance and mental wellbeing. We did this through the distribution of an online survey and the facilitation of a focus group. We conclude with a selection of recommendations that build on the analysis of our data that if implemented, could improve peer learning processes, and as a result, mental wellbeing and academic performance of undergraduate students at Cambridge.

Rationale

Peer learning, defined as students learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways, for instance study groups or tutoring, is essential to the educational process provided at the University of Cambridge. Most clearly, this is seen in supervisions, where peer learning is a crucial element of the education students receive as they are paired with their peers. Research into peer learning demonstrates that the term covers a wide range of configurations and practices beyond supervisions, and this range can be seen in Cambridge, where peer learning initiatives range from formalised study-groups to college based inter-year initiatives, to informal group chats. Despite the benefits of peer learning to the student experience in the university, a review of the different forms of peer learning within the university has not been conducted.

Our research question as such aims to fill in this lacuna, providing an overview of the range of peer learning initiatives that are present in the university. The importance of peer learning for all students makes it a powerful, yet under examined, facet of Cambridge life in relation to the attainment gap for students with mental health disorders. Providing an avenue for both academic and emotional support, peer learning can help provide structure and contact for students struggling at the university - yet these initiatives can also have unexpected negative effects when not implemented inclusively and carefully. This outcomes of this research project provides an analysis of an important aspect of the Cambridge student experience, both for students with and without mental health disorders, and indicates some important routes for change in the university.

Contextual information

Despite peer learning as practice being, according to K.J. Topping, "*traceable back at least as far as the ancient Greeks,*" studies into the practice were relatively scant prior to 1980 (Topping, 1996, p.322). Since then, a range of studies have provided a comprehensive typology of the practice, alongside highlighting the benefits and risks of its application in education (Griffiths, Houston and Lazenbatt, 1995).

One major, and pertinent for the APP PAR project, benefit of peer learning is the potential for peer learning to provide a greater sense of inclusion, support and integration for vulnerable and minority students (Rohrbeck et al. 2003). Recent studies have found benefits of peer learning both for the preliminary understanding of course material and for their meta-cognitive regulation and understanding. Thus, allowing students to understand their course and develop their learning habits better (De Backer et al. 2015).

In terms of logistics and practicalities, peer learning programmes can be technologically sophisticated or essentially zero-cost, with the effectiveness of the programmes varying across price points (Topping, 1996). Thus, the extant literature provides extensive evidence as to the benefits of peer learning, despite most research being focussed on primary and secondary education.

Reference list:

De Backer, L., Van Keer, H. & Valcke, M. (2015). Promoting university students' metacognitive regulation through peer learning: the potential of reciprocal peer tutoring. *Higher Education* 70 (3), 469–486. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9849-3>

Griffiths, S., Houston, K., & Lazenblatt, A. (1995). *Enhancing students learning through peer tutoring in higher education*. Coleraine: Educational Developmental Unit, University of Ulster.

Rohrbeck, C. A., Ginsburg-Block, M. D., Fantuzzo, J. W., & Miller, T. R. (2003). Peer-assisted learning interventions with elementary school students: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(2), 240–257. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.2.240>

Topping, K.J. (1996). The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: A typology and review of the literature. *Higher Education*. 32, 321–345. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138870>

Generation of evidence

For this project, a dual method approach was adopted, i.e., data collection was through online survey and a focus group. This approach allowed us to generate data with the general undergraduate population to provide an overview of knowledge and engagement with peer learning, and then tailor the focus group based on the responses to the survey.

Participation to the survey and focus group was not restricted to only those students with mental health conditions. We did not want to isolate anyone who might have a mental health condition but may not have formally declared this to the University. We also believe that it was important to explore whether the effectiveness of certain methods of peer learning differed for students with and without mental health conditions. Widening the scope of participants allowed for data collection from smaller courses and Colleges that we may have otherwise missed.

The questions of the online survey consisted of a total of 16 questions which included open and closed questions. These questions focused on the difference between formal and informal peer learning and the support and provision for peer learning opportunities within Departments and Colleges. The final question in the survey asked about the students' interest in participating in a focus group, and this was used as a recruitment method for the focus group. Qualtrics was used for the design of the survey. For dissemination, we utilised existing college and department networks as well as the Disabled Students' Campaign community group to send out the survey. We ensured that Junior Combination Room/Middle Combination Room Presidents, Undergraduate Administrators, and the Disabled Students' Officer had approved the posting of our surveys in all these networks prior to its sharing. The link to the survey was accompanied by a section of pre-approved text that gave a brief overview of the project, informed students that the project had been reviewed by the Cambridge Higher Education Research Ethics Committee, and provided Dr Ruth Walker's email address for further correspondence, if desired. Overall, we had 40 respondents and around 34 people made it to the end – although not all those 34 respondents answered every question.

6 participants of the online survey expressed an interest in the focus group. These participants were sent information participant sheets and consent forms along with a link to a Doodle poll to establish the best time and date for the focus group. During this process, the student researchers came together as a group to develop the questions for the focus group. We decided to ask some ice breaker questions about formal and informal learning to ease the participants into the topic. The focus group questions were around three themes: 'Recommendations and Looking Ahead', 'Departments and Colleges', and 'Critically Evaluating Peer Learning'. We worked with the team from Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL) to ensure the correct wording of these

questions. Once agreed, we emailed the question 48 hours before our focus group as felt it would be beneficial for the participants to be able to prepare for the topics.

On the day, 5 out of the 6 initial respondents participated in the focus group. The focus group took place on Microsoft Teams and lasted roughly 55 minutes. One student researcher facilitated the focus group, whilst the other two student researchers took notes and posted the questions into the chat. A staff member from CCTL was also present in the focus group for support and technical advice if any issues arose.

We asked for verbal responses to questions as well as written responses in the chat. This allowed for in depth exploration of answers, but also ensured that everyone got a chance to answer the questions that they wanted to. With the consent of the participants, we ran a transcription tool built into Microsoft Teams to help with data collection. This transcript is also available for the participants if they wish to look back on what was discussed.

Small project research findings

Our survey provided us with a diversity of student experience and views, with respondents belonging to 10 different colleges and studying 13 different subjects. Additionally, students were from first, second, and third year, including some students who had recently graduated from Cambridge. 38% of the respondents stated that they did not consider themselves to have any mental health conditions; 29% of the respondents stated that they considered themselves to have a mental health condition but had not reported this to the university; and 26% of the respondents stated that they had declared their mental health condition to the university.

1. *Types of Peer Learning*

Survey Results

We asked students to describe the kinds of formal and informal peer learning they had experienced while at Cambridge, and we received a diverse range of practices:

- **Formal**
 - *Supervisions* - including joint supervisions generally; commenting on supervision partner essays; and debates in supervisions.
 - *Workshops* - including collaborative essays; discussions; and debates.
 - *Seminars* - including debates in seminars; breakout rooms within seminars; and group discussions in seminars.
 - *Classes* - including collaborative work; and explaining material to partners in classes.
 - *Joint presentations*
 - *Lab work*

- **Informal**
 - Group chats - subject specific, college specific, and class specific.
 - Conversations after lectures
 - Generating resources in small groups

- Informal discussions in college
- Sharing essays and notes with course mates
- Reading groups among students in college
- Student-organised study groups

2. Effectiveness of Peer Learning

The respondents were evenly split between formal and informal peer learning when asked which was more effective. Formal peer learning was effective for reasons such as the scheduled time that students can dedicate themselves to, and the provision of a clear structure for learning. However, formal peer learning was not seen as inclusive or accessible as informal peer learning by some. This highlights the need for different approaches to peer learning dependent on the context and the differing needs of individuals.

3. Impact of Peer Learning on Mental Health

Respondents were asked how peer learning experiences impacted learning and academic performance on a five-point scale from very positively to very negatively. All respondents answered with either 'very positively', 'positively', or 'neutral'. However, when asked how peer learning experiences impact mental health, a few respondents answered with 'negatively' and elaborated that formal peer learning could be intimidating. This was surprising to us as researchers, as there was no indicative data of these feelings prior to this question. This illustrated to us the need to explore this area in more detail in our focus group. As a result, we added a section to the focus group questions asking how we could make peer learning more supportive of both mental health and academic performance.

Focus Group

We analysed the focus group discussion, breaking it down into 6 key points/themes:

1. Formal peer learning is fundamental;
2. Informal peer learning;
3. Supervisor initiatives;
4. Department/College initiatives;
5. Covid insights and accessibility;
6. Inclusivity.

1. Formal peer learning is fundamental

For many students, meeting peers and developing academic relationships is difficult. Formal peer learning appears to facilitate peer networking, often making it less awkward. This may especially help those with social anxiety, who may find it otherwise difficult to reach out to peers themselves.

- Facilitates peer/social networking

- *“Without group supervisions, I would never have learnt who anyone was”*
- *“prevents social isolation, facilitates relationships within the group and forces you to speak to others when maybe you wouldn't otherwise”*
- Facilitates discussions
 - *“people might make more of an effort to share ideas and communicate because they have to be there”*
 - Formal peer learning *“helps with people with social anxiety”* to meet and work with other people

2. Informal peer learning

Informal peer learning appears to benefit mental health by providing an outlet for discussions about mental health and creating social networks that people can rely on for support and help with work.

- Facilitates social connection, reduces isolation
 - *“They can help with not feeling alone and isolated and feeling that there are other people out there who are in the same position as you are.”*
- Discussing mental health
 - *“Also, informal learning means that people can communicate more about how they're truly feeling (stressed, behind with work) without having to 'admit' that to their supervisor”*
- Reduces imposter syndrome
 - *“Helps with imposter syndrome”*
- Helps with catch-up
 - *“If you're just ill, you would miss the lecture/supo, especially in person, whereas peer learning means you can catch up, share lecture notes, essays etc”*

3. Supervisor initiatives

Since a large proportion of peer learning activities at Cambridge are within the supervision system, supervisors hold the responsibility to create environments which can either help or hinder students' peer learning experiences (and, relatedly, academic performance and positive mental health). There are several things that students feel supervisors could do to create more inclusive, healthy environments:

- a. Treat students equally is important to create a sense of fairness and make the student feel valued, thereby allowing them to contribute their ideas openly and honestly.
- b. Acknowledge that different students have different backgrounds of knowledge and help students to feel comfortable about not knowing certain things. This could be through creating a welcoming space that encourages questioning and exploration rather than negatively affecting their self-esteem and hampering their learning experiences.
- c. Creating an environment which accepts questioning as important to students' learning experiences - if students are made to feel that their questions are irrelevant or should not be asked, they will not be able to seek knowledge and clarification, potentially impeding their performance.

d. Supervisors have the power to create either competitive environments or inclusive and collaborative environments - encouraging students to collaborate and support one another can positively influence their mental health.

- Equal treatment
 - *"I feel maybe it would have been helpful to make an effort to treat people the same way and make sure there is as much space/time for all students to speak."*
- Acknowledging diversity of knowledge
 - *"Having supervisor acknowledge differences in knowledge/different backgrounds, and acknowledging that is okay" can help*
- Accepting questions
 - *"Making it okay for people to ask about things they don't know"*
- Creating inclusive/collaborative environments
 - *"makes a big difference in how you perceive your peers"*

4. Department/College initiatives

Students believed that Colleges and Departments/Faculties can facilitate peer learning and were enthusiastic about the positive mental health and learning outcomes these opportunities could create. Generally, some of the ideas shared were that colleges and departments can facilitate peer networking by: 1) running/facilitating course-based socials; 2) creating group chats; 3) offering group study spaces; and 4) creating online groups. By creating opportunities for individuals to meet and work with each other, Colleges and Departments can encourage more peer learning to take place.

- Departmental student-led work socials
 - Opt-out suggested, to provide choice, but also encourage those who may be more socially anxious to attend without having to actively reach out.
 - *"Departments could make some student-led work socials, in which people are put into groups to work together."*
- Facilitate peer learning in college families
 - *"Encourage more peer learning within college families"*
- Facilitate subject-based peer networking
 - *"Set up ways for students to meet each other..."*
- Course group chats
 - *"Encourage us to set up group chats for classes and college course cohorts"*
- Group study spaces
 - *"Offer up more study spaces within college which groups can book (with whiteboards etc to facilitate group learning)"*
 - *"Offer up spaces to study that are not silent ... to develop a sense of community"*
- Departmental online groups
 - *"Have academic reps set up subject groups online at the start of the year. Needs to happen."*

- Student reps for each paper
 - This was a solution for more fragmented courses, allowing students to network with others doing the same paper

- *“Have academic reps set up groups for each paper could be useful”*

5. Covid insights and accessibility

There was broad consensus that accessibility has increased in many areas for those with mental health conditions during the pandemic through things like breakout rooms, zoom meetings, online lectures, etc. Whilst the pandemic may have negatively affected mental health in numerous areas, increased accessibility is perhaps something to be carried forward in the future. By creating more online opportunities for individuals to interact, students may find it easier to engage in peer learning activities. This also manifests in an increased amount of work-sharing, so perhaps a platform for this to take place is another consideration.

- Accessibility
 - *“Found it useful to do some organised skype sessions where we weren’t actually collaborating but being there, working together, feeling supported, was really useful”*
- Work-sharing
 - *“I think [online learning] has encouraged more peer learning because people have had to share notes/essays more”*

6. Inclusivity

Many students believe that training for supervisors as well as students could be helpful for creating more inclusive peer learning environments. Supervisors can be trained to facilitate more inclusive groups, whilst students can be trained to be more inclusive and understanding of one another.

- Training
 - *“Training for staff and supervisors for sure to make sure they know how to make it a level playing field”*
 - *“More training for students to respect each other and not put others down”*

Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

Our research finds that students believe that peer learning positively impacts their academic performance, and most believe that it also positively impacts their mental health. In addition to indicating the range of practices that are present in the university, this research indicates some obstacles to peer learning in the university, for instance a lack of space available for group study, along with some risks in peer learning initiatives for students with mental health conditions, such as competitively framed practices or non-inclusive environments.

When implemented properly, students find that formal peer learning is fundamental to create peer networks which can be used directly to facilitate academic discussions, or indirectly to create informal study or social groups, which can be further used for academic discussions or for mental health support. In discussions post-presentation, the current worries about academic malpractice in relation to informal peer learning was highlighted. We believe that this provides only further

impetus for Colleges and Departments/Faculties taking active roles in cultivating peer learning systems, to make sure that these initiatives provide the academic and pastoral benefits while remaining fair for all students. We detail our recommendations for how the university can facilitate peer learning in the section below.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. Proactive structure and guidance for peer learning in Colleges and Departments:

To facilitate the benefits of peer learning for students with mental health conditions, departments and colleges should take a more active role in encouraging both informal and formal peer learning.

- Academically rigorous peer-learning can be facilitated through the **creation of tangible space** for this learning to occur. This is particularly needed in Departments, where often the space for conversation and collaboration are lacking, meaning intra-department yet inter-college support and friendships can be rare.
- Colleges and Departments/Faculties should also take an active role in the **creation of intangible, online, spaces** for peer learning, such as creating group chats or social media pages for the subject and specific papers.
- Departments should consider the **creation of student-reps** for individual papers, to provide more fractured courses with additional student-support structures.
- Finally, both Colleges and Departments/Faculties should consider the active creation of informal peer learning initiatives, encouraging peer learning groups facilitated by older students or inter-year initiatives.

2. Provide guidance/training for supervisors on managing inclusive peer learning activities:

- Greater effort should be made to **foster inclusive and collaborative supervision environments** rather than perpetuating a competitive culture, accompanied by the acknowledgement that different students have diverse backgrounds and thus a diversity of knowledge.
 - This can be achieved through **extra training** for supervisors, though crucially this should be paid training, to ensure that it is (a) not unfairly demanding unpaid work from young supervisors and (b) increases the uptake of the training, especially amongst those who may not already be engaging in these practices.