PASSport to the Cloud – Results of a Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Online Pilot Program

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Abstract*

Deakin University's online study environment continues to grow with over 12,000 students now studying in the Cloud. It is important to provide these students not only academic support, but also a sense of inclusion and community. This will improve their social engagement and from there, they will more likely succeed. In 2015, the Division of Student Life ran an online pilot based on their successful Peer-Assisted Study Sessions program. Results from the pilot were positive. Students reported greater connection with the subject and with their fellow students. The program will be expanded in 2016 based on this pilot.

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Introduction

Deakin University places significant emphasis on providing an environment which fosters high levels of overall student satisfaction. As part of this, the university has an ongoing commitment to supporting students' academic and social engagement. Decades of research have identified these two variables as key to influencing undergraduate retention (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). It is now well known that engaged students are much more likely to succeed. For example, as early as 1975, Tinto found that students who were engaged at university were less likely to leave university, identifying a lack of social and academic integration as factors leading to attrition (Tinto, 1975). Further research into student attrition (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Tinto, 1993) revealed that the more opportunities that were provided for student engagement within university, the more likely that students would become engaged and connected, leading to greater student persistence. Tinto (2004) showed that when academic support services were linked to classroom learning, the more likely students were to engage the services and to succeed.

PASS, Online PASS and Deakin University

The Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program at Deakin University was started by the Division of Student Life in 2009 to assist in students' academic and social engagement. It has three specific goals: a) to provide a comfortable environment where students can assist one another to revise and discuss subject material thus promoting deeper understanding and learning of subject concepts; b) to allow students to build a network of friends whom they can turn to for support and develop a sense of connectedness and belonging; and c) to offer students practical and timely support to aid in the successful transition from high school to university (particularly relevant in first-year subjects).

What is PASS?

PASS is a peer-facilitated, cooperative student support and academic mentoring scheme. PASS, sometimes known as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), is an internationally accredited program based on the Supplemental Instruction (SI) program developed at the University of Missouri in the 1970s (Arendale, 1994). PASS is voluntary and open to all students and, as it targets the most difficult or high-risk subjects, it is not considered remedial. The sessions are run by current students who have successfully completed the unit. These PASS leaders are trained to help students work collaboratively, be active in their learning and to ask questions. PASS leaders prepare learning activities such as worksheets, group work or problem-solving exercises for their students and then facilitate the study sessions, helping students engage with the subject content and develop study skills.

Extensive research shows that SI-based programs are effective in aiding student engagement and enhancing academic success in a wide range of tertiary subjects. These programs also help promote the institute with lower failure and withdrawal rates, and higher retention and graduation rates (reviewed in Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky & Cowley, 2014). Research has also shown that peer learning programs such as PASS may provide a social benefit to students (Court & Molesworth, 2008; Dobbie & Joyce, 2008). Participation in an SI program was seen as valuable in enhancing students' opportunity to meet other students, developing new friendships and assisting in the assimilation into university life (Dobbie & Joyce, 2008).

Why online PASS?

Deakin's online study environment is growing. More than 12,000 students opt for Cloud Campus (online) study each year, making up 25% of all student enrolments (Deakin University, 2014). Prebble et al. (2004) emphasised the need both for support systems that help students to integrate into an institution and for the institution to adapt to meet the needs of diverse students. To ensure equity for all students, it is essential that online student engagement is specifically addressed. Developments in information technology have meant all students, not just wholly offline ones, can do their learning wherever and whenever it suits them. However, many challenges to online education have been reported, including physical isolation, lack of support, and a feeling of disconnection with the university community (Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007). With attrition rates for classes taught online being 10 – 20% higher than classes taught in a face-to-face setting (Angelino & Natvig, 2009), universities are looking to online student support programs to enhance social and academic connectedness for online students. As community development is critical in ensuring students are engaged and retained, building a cloud-based community for online learners could directly increase retention. The option for campus based students to attend online sessions provides another opportunity for students to attend PASS outside the busy on-campus scheduling. This provides an alternative time for those students who cannot attend the campus based session.

The move to online PASS-based programs has begun and pilot programs have been trialled recently in a number of institutes around the world (reviewed in Huang, Cui, Cortese & Pepper, 2015). In general, the student response from these studies has been positive. For example, greater flexibility and convenience were listed as student benefits from one Australian study (Beaumont, Mannion & Shen,

2012). However, adaptation of the well-established face-to-face PASS model into an online platform has seen a number of challenges. Without proper attention to the student experience, online collaborative learning can easily fail and the students can become disgruntled (Redmond & Lock, 2006). For example, a lack of participation in sessions has been observed by online PASS leaders. This noticeable delay in activity and question response was attributed to issues including the absence of visual cues between leader and student, as well as software and internet connection lag (Beaumont et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2015). Studies have also reported poor content coverage and relatively low attendance rates (Beaumont et al., 2012).

The Deakin CloudPASS Pilot

The Deakin University CloudPASS pilot commenced in three units mid-way through Trimester 1, 2015. CloudPASS leaders were trained in PASS session facilitation techniques and in use of the chosen online communication and collaboration tool, Blackboard Collaborate. A number of platforms were considered for the pilot including Google Docs, Google Hangouts and Skype. Blackboard Collaborate was selected as it was supported by the university. Prior to this pilot there had been trial sessions run through Blackboard over the previous two years and also the option to Skype in to situated sessions over three trimesters. The option of break-out rooms, screen sharing, capacity to use a variety of communication modes (visual, audio or message only), along with University support of the platform were the reasons why Blackboard Collaborate was selected over Skype. Initially it was planned to incorporate an asynchronous platform to the pilot using the Deakin Learning Management System (LMS) discussion boards. After consultation with the academic staff involved with the units, this was considered problematic and was not included in the pilot. An alternative to the LMS is still being investigated for use in 2016.

In an attempt to minimise technological issues during sessions, two CloudPASS leaders were recruited for each unit: a student who had successfully completed the unit and who could focus on the relevant skills and content, and; a student with sufficient IT skills who could support students who may have difficulty with the technology. Both leaders had completed PASS training and had run situated-campus PASS sessions.

Weekly attendance figures for Trimester 1 ranged between 0 and 9 students with attendance dropping off after week 7. The supported units had high Cloud Campus enrolments. However, it is suspected that, as the program was not sufficiently promoted and did not start early enough in the trimester, students did not attend.

The CloudPASS pilot had greater success in Trimester 2, 2015. The program commenced in ten units at the beginning of the trimester. Due to greater promotion at the beginning of trimester, attendance was consistent for most of the sessions over the first six weeks. It then dropped to a lower but consistent figure for the remainder of the trimester. CloudPASS in one unit was cancelled after eight weeks due to low attendance.

CloudPASS was open for all students to attend. A significant number (39%) of students who attended were Cloud Campus students. On-campus students made up 61% of the attendees.

Student feedback

At the end of each trimester, a survey was sent out to all student CloudPASS participants. The survey was based on the format of an existing PASS survey with specific questions relating to the CloudPASS model. In response to the question, 'What do you like about CloudPASS?' student responses were collated into three themes: engagement, connectedness and scheduling.

Students felt that the sessions contributed to their engagement with their course and university life because of the relaxed and casual atmosphere and the small group size, where they felt they could ask questions without feeling judged negatively. Students reported enjoying a different medium in which to revise their weekly lecture material as well as learning Blackboard Collaborate skills.

Students also reported that the sessions contributed to them feeling connected to other students due to the small number in attendance, the CloudPASS leader's ability to facilitate discussion, and the accessibility to other students who were experiencing similar academic challenges. Many students reported that their feelings of isolation lessened once they were able to discuss and contrast their difficulties with their peers. Finally, a number of students reported that they valued the flexibility of being able to study from home and wished the sessions were scheduled in more of their units.

Leader feedback

At the end of Trimester 2, 2015 a focus group with CloudPASS leaders and supervisors reviewed the pilot program and discussed issues, challenges and ideas for the future of CloudPASS. Areas of discussion included: program structure, training of leaders, technology and platform options, promotion/marketing of the program, suitable CloudPASS activities and the positive development of students. Leaders felt the program was a positive step in supporting Cloud students and though many on-campus students attended, it contributed to the diversity of students in each session and provided a platform and environment where cloud and on-campus students could engage and support each other.

Conclusion

The Deakin University CloudPASS pilot program has begun to address equity for Cloud Campus students and has helped increase their engagement both academically and socially. The students have responded overwhelmingly that CloudPASS sessions have assisted in their connection with others, which in turn has contributed to their feelings of inclusion rather than isolation.

Opportunities for Improvement

Three main areas for review have been identified: (1.) Alternative synchronous platforms that allow for improved collaboration; (2.) Leader training in how to better use the synchronous (and possible asynchronous) platforms to engage student participants in collaborative learning; and (3.) Greater recognition of the fact that this is a peer support option for both online based learners and campus based learners. The CloudPASS program expanded to all trimesters in 2016. In Trimester 2 there was a substantial increase in the number of sessions for Cloud based units with 30 sessions planned for the trimester. This is triple the initial plan.

Outcome from 2016 Students, Transitions, Retention, Achievement and Success (STARS) Conference presentation

Attendees to the 2016 STARS conference presentation "PASSport to the Cloud – Results of a Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Online Pilot Program" were asked to discuss and provide feedback on two questions put to them. The first question was, 'What other approaches have universities explored for engaging and encouraging peer-supported collaboration in an online environment?' The use of an asynchronous platform such as Facebook and the Discussion board on the institute's LMS were among the responses. One attendee commented that they also make use of two leaders in their online sessions, with one leader on a microphone and another on a keyboard, essentially creating two discussions.

Attendees were also asked, 'What benefits could there be in providing an asynchronous option (e.g., Facebook) in conjunction with a synchronous model of peer support?' Responses highlighted the advantages of the flexibility of an asynchronous platform. Students can see announcements or session information at any time and at any place. In addition, they can ask questions or respond to questions in their own time. This makes it useful for students unable to attend a session or for ones wishing to read content again at a later time. A number of attendees pointed out that students are already setting up their own class and study Facebook pages and so PASS programs could tap into this commonly used facility in a moderated form.

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