

**Peer Assisted Learning: empowering first year engagement with a formal curriculum through the educative**

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## **Abstract**

A well functioning society is bound together by shared beliefs and values that are transmitted from one generation to the next by informal educators. This perspective is transposed to institutional level with an examination of the role of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leaders: second year students who support a cohort of freshers throughout their first year. Narrative analysis has been applied to portfolios compiled by PAL Leaders seeking accreditation for their tenure by recording and reflecting on their personal and institutional development. This research illustrates ways in which first year students are aided in their integration as new community members and are encouraged to manage formal curricula; thus charting the continuation of a community of practice of independent learners. However, the emerging complexity of the PAL Leader's role also suggests that these students may be compensating for shortfalls in more formal areas of the educative; in particular, an assumption that there is shared consensus on the nature of independent learning.

## **Peer Assisted Learning: empowering first year engagement with a formal curriculum through the educative**

### **Introduction**

Broadly speaking, the history and the future of a society are inextricably woven together by a set of underpinning beliefs and values in order to perpetuate a continuum of stability; although at certain times, some of these will be challenged in order that the society remains progressive, accommodating and dynamic. Such changes may subsequently become embedded within the law and inform policy making. However, the good society, as a social construction, is also dependent on behavioural codes based on moral consensus and in order for these to be perpetuated each individual must undergo socialisation and also take some responsibility as an educator through a process of informal learning. This philosophy underpins that which is known as the educative and can be transposed to any community of practice (Wenger: 1998) where customs, traditions and belief systems are both maintained and enabled to evolve within the context of the wider society. This research examines one way in which the educative is pursued in higher education wherein informal learning strategies are aiding first year undergraduates to engage proficiently with the demands of the curriculum.

Ideally, the educative functions through continuous reflection: we deliberate on past experiences in order to inform current actions with a view to affecting the future. As Erben has argued, “although lives are empirically unpredictable there is a real sense in which selves conduct their existences as though an empirical future is likely” (1999:87).

Ironically, educators who function at a macro level may have less chance of accessing a wide audience because their academic erudition conflicts with the competitive necessity for colleges and universities to offer multiple courses informed by diverse disciplines. In turn, the wealth of formal educational options available, coupled with the devolution of some internal procedural structures to schools, faculties or departments, can augment the perceived confusion experienced by new recruits; as opposed to precipitating a sense of collegiate belonging possibly associated with older institutions. The first year undergraduate who arrives on campus with the objective of assimilating specialized formal curricula is, temporarily, devoid of a wider informal framework of rules, values and general understanding in which to fit their official learning; a peg on which to hang their new hat. Although Goffman observed that “within the lifespan, while personal identity must at some level be stable, social identity generally changes” (1957 in Van Langenhove & Harre, 1993:90), the potential for anomie in the novice who has failed to recognize and incorporate a collective persona can have devastating effects: anecdotally, university counsellors and support workers report innate unhappiness used to explain increased abuse of drugs and alcohol and high rates of attrition. What is essential is a means of quickly assimilating these students into their new community in order to “sustain enough mutual engagement in pursuing an enterprise together to share some significant learning” (Wenger, 1998:86).

Bournemouth University has a well established system of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) developed over the last six years and now highly regarded both nationally and internationally. Currently (Jan 2007), there are 118 PAL Leaders across the institution. These are second year undergraduates from a range of disciplines who work as university employees supporting a cohort of freshers throughout their first year. PAL Leaders, either individually or in pairs, prepare and deliver a weekly session for a seminar group comprising fifteen to twenty students which, although not compulsory, is timetabled. They undertake an intensive and rigorous initial training period of two days which is underpinned by the promotion of a specific role: PAL Leaders are facilitators or mentors, but never teachers. They receive subsequent follow-up training in areas such as study skills, international awareness and assertiveness and are advised to encourage their PAL group members to dictate the content/topic of each session, thus taking partial responsibility for their individual and collective learning and well-being.

In the early weeks of the first semester, the initial PAL sessions often comprise ice-breakers, advice on social issues and campus orientation designed to alleviate loneliness and develop the collective. PAL Leaders also have a link tutor in the school with whom they meet on a regular basis to discuss first year issues and to remain aware of up and coming assignments or tests. Their PAL sessions are observed at least once by the university PAL coordinators. Thus PAL Leaders act as intermediaries between the school and the first year students to promote understanding of the curriculum; and also as empathetic peers developing social awareness through the educative.

### **Methodology**

PAL Leaders have the opportunity to achieve accreditation for their work by compiling a portfolio of evidence and reflection assessed against the criteria within seven learning outcomes that have been validated by the university. The criteria mirror the individual's development as a PAL Leader and provide a wealth of biographical material which exemplifies not only the meeting of the personal and the social, but also further identifies "how individual accounts of life experience can be understood within contemporary cultural and structural settings" such as universities (Roberts, 2002:5). Employing narrative analysis to these portfolios serves at least two purposes: firstly, we can witness how the reflexivity of the second year student epitomizes the ideal of the link between past, present and future.

*The PAL Leaders are put in a situation where they will always be recalling and working on ideas taught to them maybe over a year ago; as such, it helps to ensure key concepts and understandings do not get lost (Chris BSc Computing)*

Although the leaders themselves have progressed 'in time', in a sense they regress in order to empathise with their first year colleagues. In so doing, they become true deliverers of the educative because they are not only able to re-live the first year experience, but also to build on it, albeit unwittingly. Thus, adding to or subtracting from the status quo as they originally perceived it, could suggest one way in which this particular community retains its value consensus whilst simultaneously evolving dynamically.

Secondly, the portfolios also illustrate ways in which the PAL Leaders develop both individually and institutionally. Certain discourses of power influence the construction of texts, thus the portfolios sit within what Gray (2003) refers to as a larger social text. Therefore, their framework and also that relating to the structure and content of PAL sessions are located within the historical and temporal, political and social influences of higher education. "It is impossible to understand human intentions by ignoring the setting in which they make sense" ( Czarniawska, 1998:4). However, the reflective capacities which are essential in order to make sense of cultural parameters also enable the personal to triumph and illustrate that whilst humans are dependent on interaction with their surroundings, they also, as people, become significant to other lives.

The content of ten portfolios constructed by PAL Leaders on a range of courses serves as the primary source for this research. More than enough has been written elsewhere (Roberts, 2002, Huttunen, 2006, Kohli, 2005, Hoskins, 1998) about the intention, the adequacy and the direction of biographical methodology to address any debate on its worthiness. In some respects it seems sufficient to say that "what is important is the general recognition that there exist as social phenomena an array of spoken and written forms, that provide culturally appropriate ways in which personal experience is shared, knowledge transmitted, memories are enacted and testimony is constructed" (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006:xxi). However, in this case, the application of a biographical label is, arguably, tentative not least because there are no biographies present in the sense of life course or life history. What does exist is a set of people with common characteristics who populate a social institution adhering to its individual and societal norms and values. Analysis of the written texts can inform us of connections between each of the leaders and their cohorts and between them and their university. Thus, whilst this paper embraces the significance of personal and social, it does so in a context of plurality and therefore comprises prosopography (Keats-Rohan, 2003).

In order to evaluate the educative within the students' work systematically, four thematic headings were applied to demarcate the portfolio content: independent learning; informal learning; communities of practice; personal development. These themes were identified as self - emergent from initial readings of the portfolios. However, Rosenthal (in Seale et al (eds), 2004:55) has suggested that "biographical data often gains its significance only after analysis has begun...." and as the research developed, the complexities of the PAL Leader role became more apparent. In particular, the idea that many of these second year students had assumed a pastoral function, not unlike that of an older sibling, was increasingly evident. Therefore, as this particular interpretation of the educative hinges on the significance of informal learning, it was decided that this should refer to the overall theme whilst introducing the caring role as a sub section. All the students were happy to be identified by first names and course titles.

### **Independent Learning**

In employing biographical analysis of individual texts, the researcher seeks the co-existence of the personal and the social; within the most personal of narratives will be revealed processes that are so socio-historical and culturally specific that they cannot fail to impact on all community members. Inevitably, the starting point has to be

identification of dominant discourses which will help us understand the ‘cultural prescriptions’ of a particular time and place (Pamphilon, 2006). In turn, such discourses often highlight power bases or, at the very least, what might euphemistically be termed strategic policies with which everyone is expected to engage. The concept of independent learning is one such cultural prescription current throughout the university.

Nowadays, most students ‘do’ a degree whereas the elite that comprised the undergraduate body of days past ‘read’ for theirs’; the latter process resonating of individuals learning independently and contrasting favourably with an image of massed ranks being systematically spoon-fed on their way along the conveyer belt of twenty-first century higher education. On one hand, executive decisions reached on the back of funding directives mean that academics have to concentrate on research output which leaves less time for teaching. On the other, the alleged ‘dumbing down’ of higher education, whether factually correct or not, contributes to a situation where undergraduates have to bring something extra to their search for employment in order to distinguish themselves. For example, tenure as a PAL Leader adds to the concept of employability and the production of a portfolio offers enhancement with tangible evidence. Whatever the origin of the discourse, the fact is that “staff now have less time to spend with their students [and] at the same time, the personal and academic pressures on students are increasing” (Blox & Ingleby, 1997:104). Thus, PAL Leaders are obliged to ensure that independent learning is a predominant theme in the work that they undertake with their cohort. There is really a paradox at work here as witnessed in Simpson’s claim that “it has been argued that the principal aim of student support is to produce students who no longer need that support – students who are independent learners” (2000:114).

One of the most worrying trends revealed in the portfolios was continuous reference to the simultaneous ideas that whilst lecturers expect their students to work independently and assume that this expectation is understood, many first years’ had little idea what the concept actually involved or indeed how unrewarding it might, at first, be:

*Every emphasis is placed on independent learning. It often comes as a shock to many students the lack of help they receive once they arrive at university. Independent learning requires one working in their own time. It also requires homework and preparation being done for seminars, but often the work will not be checked or even referred to (Lucy, LLB Law)*

*Independent learning is a very new and scary concept for new students because they have never been responsible for their own development. The lecturers tell the students the workload and the requirements of learning but no student really believes everything they are told by their teachers (Chris, BSc Computing)*

*Both of the groups I’ve taken over have stated that it has been very difficult to understand the type of work they are supposed to be doing as the lecturers take a very different approach to teaching compared to teachers on A Levels. I believe this lack of understanding of the teaching methods at university makes the students underestimate the effort they should be putting into their work (Alejandra, BA Accounting & Taxation)*

The views expressed by the PAL Leaders tend to mirror those produced by Forbes and Wickens (2005) who found that first year students were reluctant to seek support from tutors because, within a very short time of entering higher education, their expectations that they would be closely guided throughout their degree had been shattered by an emphasis on independent learning. As a result, freshers look to their PAL sessions to fill a perceived void which means that the PAL Leaders, already under pressure from the enhanced workload experienced in the second year, and from a reduction in their own contact hours, have to empathetically devise strategies that will help new students adjust to the expected norms.

The emphasis on group and team work as a starting block for the development of independent learning skills figured consistently throughout the portfolios. Coupled with this, the PAL Leaders were adamant that whilst their role was to support and facilitate, it was essential that the students did not come to rely upon them for formal learning; which would both invalidate the essence of their initial training and negate their own first year experience.

*It's always important to get the group to think for themselves whenever possible; this allows for the flow of ideas and it means the students are doing the work for themselves rather than relying on myself as the PAL Leader to do it for them (Katie, BA Media & Communication)*

*My role is to ask questions that guide the discussion, not to teach, give explanations or answers. The group is encouraged to find answers to the questions from amongst themselves and to bring unresolved questions to tutorials (Anastasia, LLB Law)*

*When I am asked a question by the students, I redirect it back to the group to invite and encourage them to answer their own questions. This helps them to think about what they and the others are asking, giving them time to try and answer (Katie, BA Media & Communication)*

*During all sessions, I made it clear to the students that all the answers they were looking for could be found in the library or on the internet and that they shouldn't rely on me to help them with everything (Camilla, BA Advertising, Marketing & Communication)*

By developing their own skills of learning independently, several of the PAL Leaders were also able to reflect on the importance of this type of learning when looking ahead to their post-university careers. In particular, by the onset of the second year, some had identified that whilst independent research skills and content knowledge assimilation were paramount to the higher grades that would affect their placement and job opportunities, the ability to practise self-discipline and time management was also a transferable skill of immense importance.

*For the first time, students will be asked to behave like professionals making sure that they prepare well for their lectures and seminars and do the expected work in their own time. No-one is [there] to check whether they prepare enough (Alejandra, BA Accounting & Taxation)*

*I got my PAL group to write down all their assignment deadlines that they have this year in their diaries, this way they know when to start preparing for them.....I told them it may seem patronizing to go through these with them but HE requires more from an individual than school does (Katie, BA Media & Communications)*

*Ensuring assignments are started and completed at an appropriate time is a valuable skill that no-one ever gets right at the beginning; and most never do. But there is a wider consideration to make, especially the importance of the skill in placement years and beyond university (Chris, BSc Computing)*

These examples, which are typical of the reflective output pre-empted by portfolio construction, demonstrate how some second year students are successful in identifying the significance of a void between the achieved learning skills of many first year university entrants and those that are required for them to function appropriately in their new environment. Seminar groups that attend PAL sessions will be able to compensate for any lack of understanding through strategies devised by the leaders. Nonetheless, the portfolios indicate the recognition that independent learning is a vague and troublesome model. In the same way that comments relating to a lack of critical analysis cause continuous confusion, there is probably scope here for reflection on the part of those lecturers whose induction processes fail to adequately clarify what they themselves understand by particular concepts.

### **Pastoral Care**

Thus far, it has not been possible to quantify a relationship between PAL and a reduction in attrition rates. There is, however, anecdotal evidence that the support gained from attending PAL sessions, particularly during the first few weeks of entry to university, helps to allay the anxiety precipitated by having to settle into a new community. This is important as a recent study (Harrison, 2006: 383) suggested that 27% of the sample had left university in the first semester for personal and social reasons, many of which might have been alleviated by a different approach to induction: “for some students being away from home was a sufficient single motivator to leave”, often finding it daunting to attempt integration into a new peer group. Other research (Forbes & Wickens, 2005), illustrates that first year students in particular, look to their peers for help with problems as opposed to tutors or university support services; acknowledging that whilst parents and tutors could offer moral, and in the case of the former, financial support, they failed to understand the emphasis that students put on making new friends and initiating and sustaining a good social life. One observer goes as far to suggest that those entering university “are in an equivalent position to those crossing the borders of a new country” (Mann, 2001:11); which is to say they have no knowledge of local customs, of the correct use of language and are geographically, culturally and emotionally alienated.

Czarniawska (1998:8) notes that “almost certainly, the greater part of organizational learning happens through the circulation of stories” and in this respect, the way in which the educative functions is extremely pertinent. We might argue that, whilst first year students are realizing their ‘empirical future’ (Erben, 1999) in attaining access to higher education through achieving past academic goals and setting new ones, their knowledge or ability to function appropriately in social and cultural ways becomes equally, if not predominately, demanding. For many, the anticipation and excitement of living away from home becomes tempered by the loss of environmental stability.

Without doubt, it is within the sections of the portfolios which cover this aspect of university life, that we can truly witness the auto/biographical genre in all its clarity. As the PAL Leaders reflect on their own previous experiences, their strategies in supporting the new students are two-fold: on one level, and by means of informal education, they guide and advise their cohorts in relation to the expected norms. On another level, however, again by drawing on their empathetic resources, they act in an almost protective manner, aware of the potential dangers implicit in freedom.

*Some students find it hard adjusting to university life, especially if they have come straight from college or sixth form. As a PAL Leader I am also there to support the students and guide them through any difficulties they may be experiencing, whether that be with accommodation, finding out where places are or getting a part-time job (Katie, BA Media & Communication)*

*As a PAL Leader I have encountered students having problems associated with their accommodation and not knowing who or how to solve certain issues. PAL sessions offer a safe and friendly environment for them to ask for help with certain situations (Rebecca, BA Retail Management)*

*Living away from home is daunting because most people are not used to it, not used to seeing other people most of the time other than their own family. Having to wash their own clothes, having to budget their money, being independent is often tough for first years' (Daron LLB Law)*

*Students no longer have the moral and economic support of their families. For many of them this could be the very first time they have to administrate their finances and deal with paperwork themselves (Alejandra, BA Accounting & Finance)*

The previous comments highlight the emotional issues that PAL Leaders are often confronted by and also identify the parameters of their role as they see it. Grey (2003: 21) maintains that texts such as these identify “the potential for reflexivity which [is] so useful for the exploration and investigation of cultural processes and the production of meaning”. Of particular interest are the lines of demarcation that the second year students draw. For example, as instructed throughout their training, PAL Leaders continually deploy a non-teaching role to their group, ensuring that they remain as facilitators who encourage independent learning. However, when dealing with what might broadly be referred to as pastoral issues, some leaders adopt a caring, almost familial stance which really goes beyond the expected boundaries of their employment. When talking about what the first years’ might be eating, one leader wrote:

*I think it is very important as most students are not used to dealing with cooking and shopping for food themselves. It is very difficult to control yourself money-wise and be conscious of what you eat at the same time (Alejandra, BA Accounting & Taxation)*

Other leaders were keen to stress the problems that can arise when new students try to live up to what they feel are the expectations and norms of first year social life:

*Coming to university, especially if it is their first time living away from home, is not only a daunting and scary experience, it can also be an extremely exciting one.*

*Meeting new people constantly and suddenly finding you have all this freedom can cause some students to seriously neglect their studies (Katie, BA Media & Communication)*

*Peer pressure to go out drinking every night, miss lectures, staying up late are all issues first years' may encounter as everyone wants to impress and some first years' want to influence others, especially the younger ones to do drugs and drink even when they stay indoors (Daron LLB Law)*

The ways in which PAL Leaders interpret potential problems mirrors their own individual first year experiences. For example, one student who admits to being painfully shy upon entry to university ensures that her PAL sessions reflect the type of environment that she herself needed:

*PAL sessions aim to help students build confidence in themselves by being able to talk in front of other students, voicing their opinions and suggestions. PAL sessions are aimed to be confidential safe places to learn, where if someone makes a mistake, no-one should laugh (Jos, BSc Applied Geography)*

Some students even feel that they should be pro-active in the classroom and extend the caring role beyond:

*PAL Leaders need to be observant.....especially in the first few weeks to make sure everyone is ok. This could be by spending a lunch with them, or helping them find their way round the university.....a very good method is having social events but still the quieter ones may not participate; all one can do is try and be supportive and always try to be available to answer any questions or even listen to the first years' concerns. Even a smile and 'hello' could cheer up a new student who may not have made many friends in the first week (Damien LLB Law)*

Clearly, it would be remiss to underestimate the intricacy of each individual's involvement in society in general and within this learning community in particular. Further, it becomes obvious in discussion within PAL training sessions and also during observation of PAL sessions that PAL leaders anticipate a social role in the first weeks of the semester: ice breakers, for example, might involve the discovery of information relating to the best shops and the cheapest bars; advice might be offered regarding accommodation issues. What this research indicates, however, is the willingness of many leaders to assume a protective, caring role and to be quite proactive in the light of their own experiences.

*They are encouraged to ask questions which they normally would not be it due to embarrassment or fear (Lucy LLB Law)*

*It is difficult to address personal issues in a group of many students. Perhaps the answer is to make sure students know PAL Leaders are sufficiently open and that they can be contacted on their email if they require assistance (Alejandra BA Accounting & Taxation)*

This role extension comes as something of a surprise which, perhaps, is the *raison d'être* of any research in the social sciences where it has been argued that there is no

methodology which pre-empts foreseeable results (Czarniawska, 1998). In choosing to utilize biographical methodology, one expects to see the coincidence of lives and identify points where one individual becomes significant to others. Further, recognition of the importance and appropriateness of narrative analysis for entwining the complexities of individual and social life (Erben, 1998) should logically precipitate an open mind on the part of the researcher; an unevaluated narrative remains socially insignificant (Kuhli, 2005). Nonetheless, whilst the altruism displayed is admirable, it remains the case that the responsibilities, as perceived by the second year students, are potentially onerous and it may be necessary for PAL trainers to make subsequent adjustments which more clearly define and limit the expectations made of these student employees.

### **Communities of Practice**

In this paper the framework of the educative as essential to the continuation and development of a good society has been employed to illustrate how PAL Leaders can be seen as informal educators pursuing this ethos at a micro-level. One might argue that the purpose of twenty first century higher education is to develop the skills that are functionally necessary to meet society's needs and that this pragmatism predominates (Mann, 2001). However, this perspective appears to deny any intrinsic meaningful purpose on the part of the participants. Conversely, the portfolios indicate that the second year PAL Leaders are in fact helping the first years' to forge new social identities within a specific community of practice by engaging with a hitherto unknown collective. Wenger (1998:89) goes further in suggesting that any artifacts that are produced to record an investment in community – and here we can refer to the portfolios – actually “perpetuate the repertoires of practices beyond the circumstances that shaped them in the first place”. Moreover, Ivanic (1998) adds the biographical dimension to this by examination of the academic narrative; wherein alignment with specific values, as seen in written language, manifests the interface of culture and identity. Therefore, whilst maintenance of societal values is important, this research highlights what Wenger (1998) refers to as “the stake in continuity at the level of the institution”. In fact, we might argue that communities of practice exist not only at an institutional level but also, within devolved schools, at course level.

*The prime role is to ...facilitate and assist the students in understanding the subject matter, the language and the operation of the course (Anastasia LLB Law)*

*As first year students, they were not aware of the standard format, presentations and materials required to be used in the university or writing level of legal assignments (Lucy LLB Law)*

In the latter two examples it is possible to identify yet another community of practice as Lucy reminds us ‘*all of the subjects studied during the course are controlled and regulated by the National Law Society.*’ Hence, whilst there is a central core of learning practice within HE, internal and peripheral communities also interact thus enabling accessibility of different types of knowledge and competencies depending on one's chosen degree. Furthermore, this apparent identification of multiple communities occurs firstly within the value and belief framework of the overarching institution which, secondly, is seated in the larger society. This reflects the idea that no social practice can be seen to be isolated from others and, taken to the level of the portfolios, reiterates the coincidence of the personal and the social.

PAL Leaders use their past experiences and empathetic skills not only to guide new students into acceptable practices, but also to anticipate where potential problems might occur. Often, dependent on one's perspective, these might appear to be pitfalls at such a basic level that tutors could be forgiven for failing to recognize that establishing one's place in a community involves achieving the security of recognizing accepted norms.

*We are able to advise them on points which lecturers might not explain or even cover such as expected layout and font sizes regarding their assignments (Lucy LLB Law)*

*I had to learn how to Harvard reference myself last year, which I found hard to grasp, so I thought giving the students some basic advice on referencing would be of use (Kathryn BA Retail Management)*

*On going through a list of academic skills provided by their tutor, we worked through each point, explaining it in colloquial language so it appeared nowhere as bad as it looked (Camilla BA Advertising, Marketing & Communication)*

*By hearing from someone who has just been through what they are about to start, we can give a more honest and realistic view of what they need to be doing outside university hours (Chris BSc Computing)*

Whilst we can see here how freshers are helped with their integration into academia, it is also important to remember that, in a community of practice, participation is multi-faceted and shared. For example, some portfolio content not only highlights ways in which the leaders were able to learn themselves from their group, but also emphasizes the role of the link tutors and other academic staff.

*There needs to be comfort and mutual understanding and co-operation in order to achieve participation (Anastasia LLB Law)*

*Through the meetings [with the link tutor] I was also able to pass on the feedback from my group on the particular difficulties or successes they were facing, onto other course staff. I also learn from the students themselves when we discuss their different learning styles or little habits that had helped. I find these also work for me (Lucy LLB Law)*

*Our course contact decided to provide a copy of the marking criteria so that we could better discuss the assignment. We later annotated and used the criteria in a PAL session (Damien LLB Law)*

*The sessions also gave the academic team a way in which to tell us of up and coming assignments which may be in the pipe-line as well as any bits of information we may need. PAL sessions are about learning from each other (Chris BSc Computing)*

From this section it is possible to draw together a number of themes; not least being that a community of practice demands participation at all levels in order for both formal and informal learning to be successfully shared and remain dynamic. It also highlights the significance of lives upon each other which is paramount to

understanding the continuum between the sphere of the individual and that of the collective. In some ways, this could be seen as the appropriate conclusion of a paper based on an examination of peer assisted learning and the educative. However, in order to maintain the continuity of past, present and future, it is necessary to account for some aspects of the personal development of the PAL Leaders which they will subsequently take with them to diverse and unknown communities.

### **Personal Development**

Within the portfolios it has been possible to observe ways in which peer assisted learning offers support and induction into a culturally new environment for hundreds of first year students; some of whom exhibit signs of vulnerability and all of whom are prone to anomie. The role of the PAL Leader is, in effect, manifold but “even without an explicit causal link being made between events in a narrative, readers will tend to read causality into a sequence of events recounted as a narrative” (Elliott 2005:7). Therefore, whilst it may appear to be an empirical reality that the work of PAL precludes a great deal of the unhappiness that might lead to increased attrition, and that this is, in fact, the base motivation for most leaders, this particular piece of research does not attempt to make these kinds of macro claims. Rather, we are here concerned with the coexistence of individuals who affect each others lives through assimilation into the collective. What we can say then, is that the portfolios, as social texts, also manifest the beneficial mutuality of the PAL process by illustrating how the PAL Leaders undergo stages of personal development.

Previously, we referred to ways in which the educative underpins a community whilst ensuring that periodic challenges help it to remain dynamic. The way in which the individual PAL Leader reflects on their current traits and seeks to improve through the development of additional skills in order to integrate new members into the academic community seems to mirror this process of ensuring continuity and dynamism. This phenomenon can be witnessed within particular outcomes and also in the way the narratives themselves progress. Huttunen (2006:3) makes a similar observation in a not entirely unrelated context: “there are some applications of the narrative approach within the sphere of teacher education, in which the narratives serve as a practical means of achieving identity as a teacher (Lukes & Knowles, 1995) [and] the purpose of the teachers’ self-narratives is to promote their personal and professional growth.” So it may be in the telling of lives that order is imposed and development can thus be accounted for. As has been observed elsewhere (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), even if this organization of the narrative is spurious, it is difficult to avoid because most people are naturally concerned to make some sense of events in their lives. Indeed, the very fact that something is defined as an ‘event’ indicates a beginning and an end and thus a narrative.

Predominately, students asked to construct an action plan which encouraged them to identify and update the gaps they perceived between their existing traits and those skills needed to be a successful PAL Leader, stated that they lacked the confidence to stand up in front of their group in order to put their plans and ideas into practice.

*The most challenging part of being a PAL Leader is definitely standing in front of the group speaking, as before I did PAL I was not very confident or even comfortable speaking in front of an audience (Daron LLB Law)*

*I had to constantly concentrate on my body movements and use of language to ensure I was not creating a negative atmosphere in the class (Anastasia LLB Law)*

*At first, the sessions I created were very rigid making it very difficult for conversations to expand (Chris BSc Computing)*

However, as the narratives progress, it is possible to identify how individual leaders become aware of their own personal development. Further, some students are using this recognition to foresee how their new skills will be transferable in subsequent areas of their careers. Again, this reiterates the way in which a biographical approach resonates with the notion of a continuous temporal link so that the present is the culmination of the past and the future (Rosenthal in Seale et al (eds), 2004).

*I feel that I have improved my organizational skills since becoming a PAL Leader. This is through regular planning of sessions for the students and by attending PAL training sessions (Katie BA Media & Communication)*

*Since becoming a PAL Leader I feel that I have changed in myself, in my studies and also in the way in which I organize myself. I now have an inner confidence, a knowledge and belief that I can complete the task in front of me (Lucy LLB Law)*

*I feel I now do not give up as easily as before. I now feel more confident when talking to people I don't know which will benefit me in my interviews for my placement year. PAL looks good on my CV for a placement job and for graduate employment. This could benefit me when an employer is deciding between me and someone else; it will make me stand out more (Kathryn BA Retail Management)*

*Being an effective communicator means that other people take you seriously, listen to what you have to say and engage in dialogue (Anastasia LLB Law)*

These particular reflections illustrate not only the essential importance of artifacts to the analytical researcher but also to the composers themselves. In this case, the original purpose of the portfolios, as seen by the assessors, was to act as a mirror of development; to the students, the aim was to meet and record adherence to a set of prescribed criteria. Arguably, such criteria are manifestations of a wider social discourse that imposes predominant expectations or values. However, the fact these criteria coerce the student into rationalizing and explaining their choices and actions illustrates how artifacts, both in their construction and subsequent re-reading, become prompts in re-calling time lost; they enable the significance of the individual to infiltrate the social.

## **Conclusion**

Mann (2001) has argued that the life-course itself has become institutionalized to the extent that whilst a student passing through higher education can anticipate an empirical future, it will be an educational journey without significance or meaning. The portfolios relating to the experiences of the PAL Leaders and their cohorts, however, recount a different story that is redolent of meaningful purpose. Of course, one can maintain that a particular narrative device will construct 'the truth' within the confines of particular social contexts and their dominant discourses (Hoskins, 1998). In the case of the portfolios used in this research, it is important to remember that they

are subject to competence based assessment in order for the PAL Leaders to gain accreditation. It is, therefore, unlikely that they would be the source of unresolved issues precisely because the leaders would then be judged as not competent; which goes some way in explaining why the experience of PAL has been represented in an entirely positive light. Acknowledging this may leave some questions unanswered but it makes use of the texts neither incoherent nor redundant. In the case of the portfolios, as Ivanic maintained, one can witness written language that “is imbued with purpose and interpersonal relationships” (1998:61); narratives that illustrate the temporality of identity within the spectrum of continuity. Moreover, the increase in PAL or related mentoring schemes in post compulsory education must indicate recognition of potential problems experienced by new students in the face of reduced contact with tutors.

We have seen how lives become significant to others as they coincide at different points and these examples illustrate the centrality of empathy and authenticity in affective support of both new learners and new community members. It is, therefore, not only rational, but also essential that, at some stage, members of a particular society, such as PAL Leaders, will contribute to its well being and that of other members by means of the educative.

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