

Peer Learning [HPEC Fast Facts]

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HPEC Fast Facts

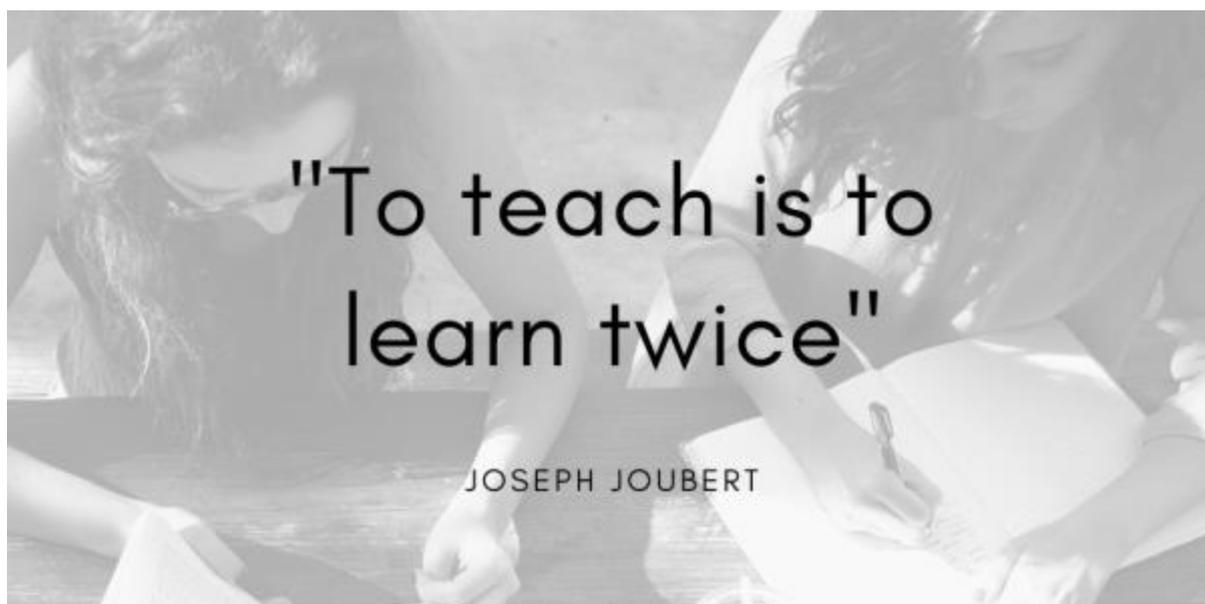
Several decades of research have accumulated on the benefits of peer learning in health professions' education. In this month's edition of Fast Facts, we look at how peer learning - in its many versions - works.

We also look at how to incorporate peer learning into your teaching, for the benefit of your students *and* your own professional development.

Jenny Moffett

Editor, HPEC Fast Facts

Fast Facts: Peer learning



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- *Peer learning "reduces the distance" between teacher and learner*
 - *Peer learning holds many evidence-based benefits for learners and teachers*
 - *There are practical steps to consider when starting out with peer learning*
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Peer learning encompasses a wide and diverse range of educational strategies. From 1-2-1 peer tutoring and workplace mentoring, to classroom “[jigsaw](#)” activities and study groups, all of these health professions’ education activities come under the umbrella of peer learning. Topping’s ([1996](#)) commonly accepted definition helps us to visualise the concept as: “people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching.”

A key characteristic of peer learning is that the student(s) steps into the role of teacher. Peer teachers can either be at the same level as, or more senior to (“near peer”), the students that they teach. With either case, there is a change in the dynamics of the classroom (or ward, or clinic), and a “reduced distance” between teacher and learner is created.

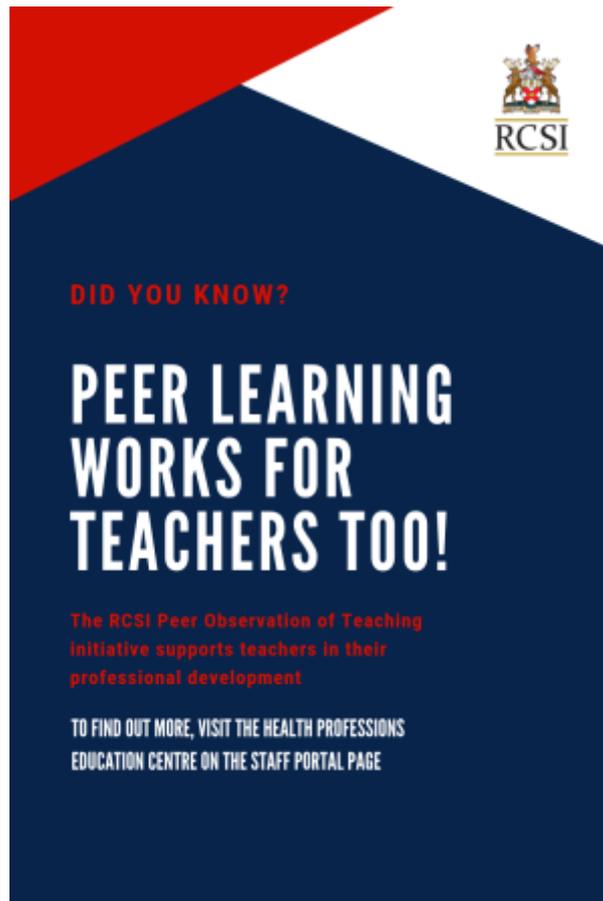
This small distance means that peer teachers have a clearer understanding of their learners’ starting point and, thus, can clarify concepts more easily. In addition, learners can experience a more comfortable learning environment where they feel freer to argue points or disclose gaps in their knowledge. It is thought that “learners may feel more at ease with a near peer teacher than a senior expert” due to a [social congruence](#) brought about by peer learning ([Ten Cate and Durning, 2007](#)).

Although how peer learning works is an emerging area of research, studies over the last three decades have uncovered a range of beneficial educational outcomes. These can be grouped into three broad areas:

1. Benefits for learners: peer learning can encourage greater retention and application of knowledge ([Peets et al., 2009](#)), improve clinical skills ([Blank et al., 2013](#)), improve exam performance, and impact on affective factors, e.g. raising confidence and reducing anxiety ([Perry et al., 2010](#); [Stone et al., 2013](#)).
2. Benefits for peer teachers: it's thought that teaching, and preparing to teach, "may stimulate high level processing of information" ([Ten Cate & Durning, 2007](#)), resulting in cognitive gains for peer teachers. Mixed evidence exists in relation to the impact of peer activities on the peer teacher's individual exam performance, but it's likely that gains in communication and leadership skills are experienced, as well as the development of specific, transferable teaching skills ([Biltucci, 2015](#)).
3. Benefits for faculty: from an institutional perspective, peer learning strategies provide increased opportunities for students to practise and improve their knowledge and skills. This can ease pressure on teaching staff and resources, and, if run well, peer learning can be a cost-effective way to enhance learners' educational experience.

There are many inherent advantages to using peer learning within health professions' education, but it is important to incorporate any new strategy thoughtfully. Effective peer learning activities take time to set up. There are important decisions to be made around the structure of the activities, who will take part, and what training and resources they will need. If you are new to using peer learning in your teaching, here are five tips to consider:

1. Start with the end in mind. What do you want peer learning to achieve? Are there topics or areas of content material that you want to provide increased opportunities for practice? Or, are you more concerned with the process, i.e. you want to encourage teamwork or critical thinking skills? When you are starting out, it is recommended that you use peer learning to review or rehearse topics previously covered rather than addressing new material.
2. Reflect on which format of peer learning suits your learners' needs best, i.e. What ratio of peer teachers to peer learners is preferable? Do you want same year students or near-peers? Do you want peer teachers and learners to switch roles within the activity?
3. Use a lesson plan with clear learning outcomes to structure the activity and to help you work out what resources you might need. Discuss your ideas with other teachers and students to get practical feedback.
4. Decide on what training your peer teachers will need. Less training is required for simple in-class activities e.g. [syndicates](#). For more formal peer tutoring or assessment activities, it is important to provide support around teaching skills e.g. providing feedback.
5. Road-test the activity with a small group of students. Decide on how you will monitor the activity and add checkpoints for quality control.



Useful resources

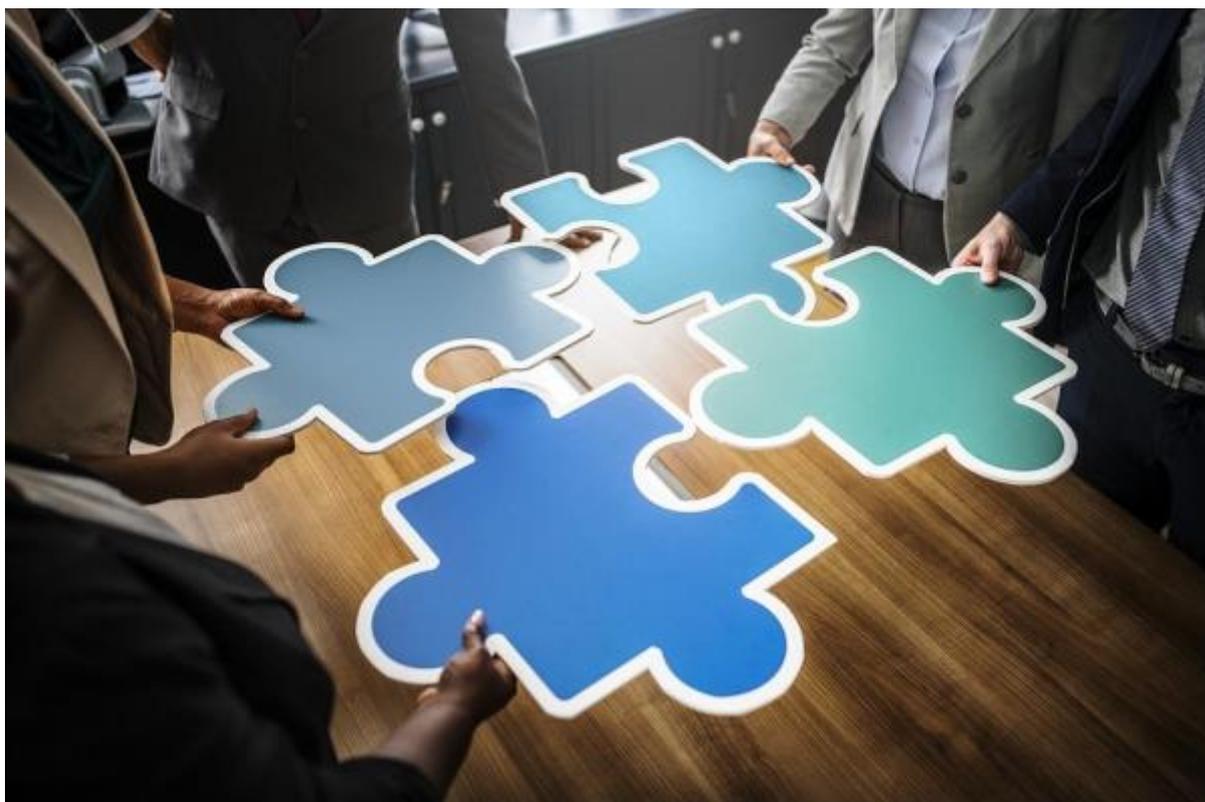
Papers:

- [Gottlieb, Z., Epstein, S., & Richards, J. \(2017\). Near-peer teaching programme for medical students. The clinical teacher, 14\(3\), 164-169.](#)
- [Ross, M. T., & Cameron, H. S. \(2007\). Peer assisted learning: a planning and implementation framework: AMEE Guide no. 30. Medical teacher, 29\(6\), 527-545.](#)
- [Sevenhuysen, S., Farlie, M. K., Keating, J. L., Haines, T. P., & Molloy, E. \(2015\). Physiotherapy students and clinical educators perceive several ways in which incorporating peer-assisted learning could improve clinical placements: a qualitative study. Journal of physiotherapy, 61\(2\), 87-92.](#)
- [Stone, R., Cooper, S., & Cant, R. \(2013\). The value of peer learning in undergraduate nursing education: A systematic review. ISRN nursing, 2013.](#)
- [Wadoodi, A., & Crosby, J. R. \(2002\). Twelve tips for peer-assisted learning: a classic concept revisited. Medical teacher, 24\(3\), 241-244.](#)

Video: [Peer Instruction for Active Learning – Eric Mazur](#)

Podcast: [The experience of interdisciplinary peer-assisted learning \(PAL\) – Christopher Saunders](#)

Where can I find out more?



Peer learning for staff development

Don't forget that teaching staff can also avail of the many benefits of peer learning. The RCSI peer observation of teaching initiative is the ideal way to get started in learning with, and from, a colleague.

The current recommendation is that any individual with an active role in teaching RCSI students should take part in peer observation twice yearly (once as an observer, once as an observee). So, whether you are new to peer observation of teaching or you want to set up this year's observation, please visit the HPEC website to access our [supporting resources](#).

We hope you enjoy HPEC's Fast Facts. If you would rather not receive these educational updates, please reply to us at hpec@rcsi.ie with "Unsubscribe" in the email title.

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