

A Near-Peer Support Assignment in GRK 101 and 201

This paper describes the outcome of an experimental course assignment implemented in Fall 2023, which explored a new approach to mitigate the perennial problems of enrolment, retention, and morale in ancient language classes. Rather than focusing exclusively on co-peer learning (i.e., activities where students at the same level work together, see, e.g., Bayerle 2013, Meinking 2015, Trego 2014) as I had in the past, I opted to explore complementary near-peer learning techniques (i.e., activities where more advanced students work with newer students), as described by Argetsinger (2006). Her near-peer approach promised three compelling benefits: 1) novice instructors can explain grammatical ideas in terms other students may more easily grasp (by contrast with the expert professor); 2) undergraduate tutors report huge gains in their own grammatical understanding; 3) language programs benefit overall when more senior students model success and enjoyment to beginners.

In Argetsinger's Latin classroom, peer-supported reading groups were created primarily to meet the learning needs of introductory students, with knock-on benefits for the tutors. By contrast, my experimental assignment prioritized the pedagogical benefits of near-peer learning for my intermediate Greek students, with the added benefit of study support for the introductory class. Rather than hand-picking a few elite students to serve as tutors, I entrusted my entire GRK 201 class with the responsibility of supporting a section of GRK 101 that happened to be meeting in the same time slot. Over a 12-week semester, the intermediate students exchanged "pen pal" letters with the 101 class, then, on two separate occasions, ran active learning stations of their own design to help the introductory students study for upcoming assessments. 201 students prepared for classroom visits by doing dry runs in class and submitting a formal lesson plan for

feedback; they also handed in a reflection after the first visit. All aspects of the assignment were designed to emphasize the teaching principles discussed by Ambrose et al. (2010) including motivation, practice/feedback, course climate, and metacognition (see also Geller-Goad 2018 for a helpful discussion of their application in the Greek and Latin classroom).

As I submit this abstract, we are still in the “pen pal” phase. I look forward to sharing the outcome of my experiment and discussing future directions for near-peer teaching in my institutional context, including a more formalized experimental design, longer-term data collection, and the possibility of introducing a Peer Teaching course into my institution’s language curriculum.

Bibliography

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