

What is the Learning Assistant Model? Transforming Your Course into an LA-Supported Course

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Abstract

The Learning Assistant (LA) model is for improving the recruitment and education of STEM teachers. LAs are undergraduate students that adopt both roles, teacher's assistant and tutor. The LA model was established in 2003 at the University of Colorado-Boulder. The roles of the LA include guiding weekly preparation sessions with students, facilitating discussions in and outside of the classroom, and providing feedback to improve the effectiveness of teaching. Research has shown dramatic increases in student achievement in LA-supported courses and decreased failure rates. The faculty at NTID have adopted and modified this model for interpreting students. The workshop will discuss how LA support both ASL and interpreting classes, in addition to data collected on the success of our implementation. We will provide attendees with ideas on how to incorporate the model in their own programs.

Keywords: Learning Assistant, Sign Language, Interpreting, Pedagogy, Deaf Education

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“No matter how much I have worked with this student, she still seems to struggle with her sign language and interpreting skills. What else can I do to make a difference?” Sound familiar? Those of us who teach in the field of signed language interpreting education can relate to this dilemma. We are frustrated and sometimes exhausted from trying to go beyond teaching and miraculously prepare a student to enter the profession by graduation. Is there a magic pill that instills the skills our students need by the time they graduate? We wish there were an easy solution. We educators are constantly seeking innovative pedagogical approaches that increase students’ skills and readiness to enter the profession.

The faculty in the American Sign Language & Interpreting Education (ASLIE) department at Rochester Institute of Technology’s National Technical Institute for the Deaf (RIT/NTID) are regularly re-evaluating and investigating best practices for effective teaching and learning. Home to approximately 150 students, ASLIE is proud of its long history of preparing entry-level interpreting professionals. Despite our faculty’s wealth of teaching experience, some students’ American Sign Language (ASL) and interpreting skills do not adequately develop within their undergraduate program.

In 2016, we discovered the RIT Learning Assistant (LA) program. This evidence-based program conforms to the University of Colorado’s model, whose goal is to improve science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. Learning Assistants are undergraduate students who help make courses more student-centered by using interactive techniques that enhance student engagement. RIT’s LA program outcomes (S. Franklin, personal communication, September 15, 2016) mirror those around the country (Otero, Finkelstein, McCray, & Pollock, 2006; Pollock & Finkelstein, 2008; Gray, Webb, & Otero, 2010, Otero, Pollock, & Finkelstein, 2010): improved grades, student retention, and teacher recruitment. These promising results led us (ASLIE Department Chair and Associate Professor Kim Kurz; Assistant Professor Jason Listman; Interpreting Lecturer Daniel Maffia, and ASL Lecturer Marguerite Carrillo) to replicate the LA model and apply it to our interpreting education classrooms. Based on faculty and interpreting students’ testimonies, implementing the LA model seems to improve students’ confidence levels in both ASL and interpreting skills.

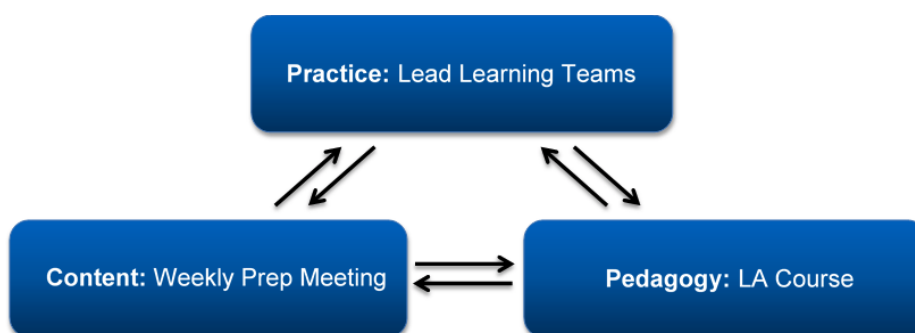
Background: Learning Assistant Model

The Colorado LA Program was launched in 2003 to improve Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education outcomes (Otero, 2006). Students were underperforming in STEM courses and there was a lack of well-qualified STEM teachers. STEM faculty recruited undergraduate LAs in an endeavor to transform pedagogical approaches and enhance student performance. Additional goals included promoting discipline-based education research, fostering institutional change, and inspiring LAs to become future STEM educators. The LA Program transformed STEM education by promoting interactive engagement and student-centered instruction.

What is the Learning Assistant Model?

The Experiential Learning Model of the LA program has three main themes: content, pedagogy, and applying learning through practice in a course (see Figure 1). LAs attend a weekly STEM education seminar (pedagogy), meet weekly with the faculty whose course they support (content), support student learning through interactive course activities (practice), and provide formative feedback to the instructor.

Figure 1: The Learning Assistant Experience Triangle



One might ask why we need LAs if we already use teaching assistants (TAs) or tutors. The distinguishing feature is that, while TAs improve the status quo by focusing mainly on assisting instructors, LAs challenge the status quo by focusing on supporting learners. LAs make quick, responsive decisions about scaffolding student learning on a case-by-case basis. They promote a culture of active learning in and outside the classroom and provide additional perspective on where students struggle and what helps students understand a concept. TAs have little training; LAs are better prepared through the pedagogy course. Tutors have little impact on what happens during class and tailor their work to one specific student. By contrast, LAs help students learn to help each other in groups.

The program has been very successful. Since its implementation, colleges have almost tripled the number of LAs majoring in STEM teaching careers, positively impacting the quality of secondary STEM education. Additionally, research provides evidence that LA-supported classes demonstrated higher student achievement (Pollock, 2009; Otero, 2015) and the program had less failure rates, especially among underrepresented college students who are STEM majors (Close, Conn, Close, 2016). The rates of “D,” “F,” and “W” (Withdraw) grades have dropped for those in LA-supported classrooms. Price & Finkelstein (2008) report that students taking LA-supported courses found these courses to be favorites and useful compared to other courses that do not offer LA support. Strong evidences of success from the program led other colleges and universities to adopt the Colorado LA Model at their institutions.

Applying the LA Model to Sign Language Interpreting Classrooms

Based on testimonies in both the interpreting and ASL education communities, the demand for ASL and interpreting education has grown in the past few years, yet there is a shortage of ASL and interpreting educators. Concurrently, today's' students are declaring their major in interpreting with minimal interaction with the deaf community (Cokely, 2005). More and more college students arrive with a variety of unique learning styles and preferences. It must also be noted that with the Deaf community becoming more and more diverse, it is more imperative than ever to have additional support in the classroom (Cogen & Cokely, 2015). While the primary goal of both the Colorado LA Model and RIT's LA Program is to improve STEM education, we wanted to see if the

What is the Learning Assistant Model?

model could successfully be adapted to ASL and interpreting education. We decided to implement a pilot LA program to see if it could increase student success for those who were lagging in their ASL and interpreting skill development, as well as cultivate potential future educators.

We began experimenting with the LA model in 2016. Four faculty members have utilized LA support in their courses. Since then, one faculty member has left the department, leaving three instructors who have experienced working with LAs. Learning assistants are paid to work 10 hours per week to provide in-class and out-of-class support for students, plus a stipend to cover weekly content planning sessions with faculty. The funds to cover program expenses were provided by the college of NTID as part of an initiative to investigate whether the success of RIT's LA Program could be replicated in NTID programs. We recruited LAs through advertisements, personal invitation, or students volunteering after having experienced LA support in their own classes.

LAs are required to take RIT's 2-credit pedagogy course. The pedagogy course is designed to provide knowledge regarding best practices in active learning, including questioning strategies, strategies for promoting discourse, information on learning theories, and weekly reflections. The course addresses such skills as (1) encouraging students to express their ideas, making sure all group members are active and engaged learners in classes; (2) listening and questioning; (3) building relationships; and (4) integrating learning theories with effective practices. LAs synthesize their learning by writing weekly reflections that analyze how their application of learning theories and education research impacts their students' learning progress.

In addition to the pedagogy course, LAs meet weekly throughout the semester with the faculty whose course they support. During each planning session, faculty and LAs discuss concerns regarding students' progress and how the LA can best support students by modifying certain class activities or providing supplemental instruction outside of the classroom. We review lesson plans in addition to training LAs to grade students' homework assignments, comprehension and expressive skill exams. We also provide LAs with feedback on their performance, and our LAs have the opportunity to share their feedback with faculty to improve teaching effectiveness. The meeting also provides us the opportunity to mentor our LAs on how to successfully navigate their academic trajectory.

LA Role in Our Classroom

The role of LAs in our sign language interpreting classes is to support students' ASL and English skill development inside and outside of the classroom, as well as to promote involvement in the deaf and interpreting communities. Our faculty employ a variety of approaches to utilize LAs in our classrooms. For example, LAs can create and modify a class activity, or review content that appears to be challenging for certain students. For example, Danny Maffia's LA #1 created an in-class activity to support student learning because she herself struggled when she took the course. She endeavored to make the activity exciting and fun to help students tackle the challenges of understanding and applying interpreting sub-skills. According to Danny's students, the activity "helped build on foundational materials our instructor taught us and enhanced our understanding of the topic." In another approach, Marguerite Carrillo's LA reviewed class materials or activities outside of class with her students. This approach reinforced what student were learning in class. According to Marguerite, students seemed to do better if the activity was conducted by her LA.

Another way LAs supported student learning occurred when teachers explained a complicated linguistic rule. The LA broke down complicated concepts into small sub-topics to accommodate certain students' learning style. For example, in Jason Listman's class, his LA interrupted the lecture to clarify the content to students who appeared confused. On certain occasions when Jason thought his lecture was clear, his LA ascertained that it was not clear to some students and jumped in to clarify the content in a different way. Students seem to appreciate the LA providing this additional explanation. These experiences resulted in the recognition that there are times when peer-to-peer instruction can be highly effective in supporting students' learning.

LAs can also serve as bridges connecting students with the Deaf and interpreting communities inside and outside of NTID. One way our LAs did this was to announce on a weekly basis what deaf-related or signing events were happening that week. The LA offered to accompany students to ease their fear of meeting new deaf people or interpreters. The fact that the LA was their peer tended to make students feel more comfortable than

What is the Learning Assistant Model?

attending with an instructor. This provided additional opportunities for students to use ASL in the community beyond the classroom.

To determine the impact of having an LA in the classroom, we asked our students to share their views with us regarding the experience. Feedback was given anecdotally, through course evaluations, and data collected by the LA's themselves from our students. Some of the recurring themes that we frequently received from our students were "thoroughly," "clarity," and "great teaching style." For classes whose LA was an interpreting student who provided model interpretations, students felt it can be a realistic goal to think, "In a year's time, with hard work and effort, I can look like that." For other classes whose LA was a Deaf student, students felt more comfortable and at ease when interacting in the deaf community because their LA introduced them to members of the community. In addition, interpreting students said that the LA made them feel more confident with their ASL and interpreting skills as compared to classes without an LA.

We observed that our students often feel much more comfortable working with a peer; LAs are usually viewed as a fellow student who understands their needs and wants rather than as an authoritative figure like their instructors. Even though faculty endeavor to create a positive and safe learning environment in their classes, some students may find them intimidating. LAs strive to cultivate a relationship of trust with the students they support, leading some students to prefer asking content-related questions to their LAs instead of their instructors. They may perceive that asking questions is a sign of weakness and fear that the teacher would judge them based on the number of questions they ask in their struggle to gain a better understanding of course content.

Recommendations & Future Considerations

From our experience utilizing LAs in our classes, we would like to share some observations and recommendations for interpreting educators to consider when implementing the LA model. It is our observation that interpreting students who struggled somewhat in prior interpreting skills courses but ultimately succeeded make the best LAs for interpreting courses. Students look up to these LAs, who inspire them to believe that they, too, can succeed someday or at least help them see the "light at the end of the tunnel." Second, we recommend that programs hire Deaf LAs for ASL courses. Interpreting students need to start becoming more comfortable with receiving feedback from a Deaf consumer. Our students seem to be more receptive to feedback from the Deaf LA rather than the instructor. Having Deaf LAs does require that the instructor train them on course content, since they have not previously taken the course. Ideally, the instructor should re-hire the Deaf LA for the same course in the future, reducing the need for training on course content. Finally, although one might assume that children of deaf adults who demonstrate language proficiency make the best LAs, this is not necessarily the case. Some interpreting students feel insecure with a highly proficient LA's signing and may become discouraged in their efforts to improve their own interpreting skills.

All of our LAs are required to take RIT's 2-credit STEM pedagogy course. This course requires students to conduct research related to the effectiveness of LA's in the classroom. One drawback to this course is that some of the topics not relevant to working with students in ASL and interpreting courses. We recommend that interpreting education programs develop a customized pedagogy course for their LAs. Another important consideration is the fact that having an LA can be time-consuming for some faculty. It requires a time commitment for the weekly planning meetings with LAs and a dedication to invest in their LAs, helping them to understand teaching and learning strategies as well as the discipline content. The faculty member must be committed to coaching the LA on a regular basis.

Conclusion

In the end, the experience has been well worth the effort. We have seen incremental course transformation that was informed by feedback we received from our LAs, leading us to modify some pedagogical approaches and lesson materials. It is our intention to further explore the best practices of signed language and interpreting

What is the Learning Assistant Model?

pedagogical methods, including conducting formal research and experiments with the LA model. In the meantime, we are happy to share our experience with you if you are considering the possibility of implementing the LA model in your program. We encourage you to give it a try. If you do, we would love to hear from you regarding your experience. There is a great need for interpreting educators to exchange resources and share data, results, and recommendations related to effective teaching practices and learning strategies that work for our interpreting students.

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