



Peer Sharing Presentations in a First-Year Engineering Learning Strategies Course

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Abstract

This **Complete Evidence-Based Practice** paper details the use of peer sharing presentations in a learning strategies course designed for first-year engineering students. The learning strategies course is a component of the General Engineering Learning Community at Clemson University, with the ultimate goal of increasing the retention of engineering students entering the university with underprepared calculus skills [1], [2]. Two secondary goals of the program that feed into the first include providing academic support through on-campus resources and constructing a community of learners. The learning strategies course promotes program goals by equipping students with effective personal and professional skills related to self-regulatory behaviors, learning strategies, and habits of mind, while simultaneously building their awareness of available academic resources.

Peer sharing presentations, the instructional practice that is the focus on this paper, allow students to become familiar with a number of personal and professional strategies for success within the structure of the learning strategies course. The goal of the peer sharing presentations is to provide students with the opportunity to explore evidence-based practices and share their findings with peers. The peer sharing presentation process includes students selecting a strategy, learning about the selected strategy, creating a set of informative and engaging slides, presenting their findings to peers, and reflecting on their peers' presentations. Through this process, the peer sharing presentations are an innovative way for students to engage as active learners in the collaborative construction of new knowledge.

The effectiveness of peer sharing presentations as a course activity is evaluated through an exploratory qualitative approach. Through the analysis of student-created slides and student reflections on their peers' presentations, it was determined that students experienced growth across self-regulatory, social, and academic outcomes. After an extended exploration into and discussion of these results, we provide implications for practitioners interested in utilizing an instructional technique similar to the peer sharing presentations.

Introduction

This **Complete Evidence-Based Practice** paper details the use of peer sharing presentations in a learning strategies course designed for first-year engineering students. The General Engineering Learning Community (GELC) at Clemson University was created in Fall 2017 to provide entering first-year engineering students, who were underprepared in Calculus, with resources and a curriculum that contributes to their success at the university level, as it was noticed that many of these students struggled to stay "on course" for graduation, with many dropping out of engineering entirely. The overall goal of the GELC is to increase the retention of engineering students entering the university with underprepared calculus skills [1, 2]. Two secondary goals of the program that feed into the first include providing academic support through on-campus resources and constructing a community of learners.

In an attempt to accomplish these goals, one component of the GELC is a learning strategies course for students in the program. The learning strategies course focuses on equipping students with effective personal and professional skills related to self-regulatory behaviors, learning strategies, and habits of mind, while simultaneously building their awareness of available academic resources. Examples of self-regulatory behaviors addressed through the course include creating a routine or schedule, using a planner, and maintaining physical and mental health. The learning strategies aspect of the course covers evidence-based practices for becoming a successful student, such as creating graphic organizers, developing study guides, or taking effective notes. The section of the course focused on promoting positive habits of mind prompts students to develop a growth mindset and reflect on their experiences to create a plan for action going forward.

Within the learning strategies course, peer sharing presentations are employed to allow students to become familiar with a number of personal and professional strategies for success within the structure of the learning strategies course. The goal of the peer sharing presentations is to create a learner-centered approach for exploring evidence-based practices and sharing their findings with peers. The peer sharing presentations are an innovative way for content to be delivered to and from students, allowing students to engage as active learners in the collaborative construction of new knowledge. The purpose of the current study is to answer how, if at all, peer sharing presentations affect outcomes for first-year engineering students. Since this work is exploratory, we broadly use the term “outcomes” to allow for emergent themes or observable shifts in any number of domains, such as academic, social, or self-regulatory.

Peer Sharing Presentations

Broad Overview of Peer Instruction Technique

The aim of this section is to provide a broad overview of peer instruction in the context of engineering education at the university level. Peer instruction, also referred to as peer teaching and peer learning, has been identified as a pedagogical technique that promotes active learning in students [3], [4]. The technique requires students to create a packaged instructional lesson and effectively deliver this lesson to their peers. Students are tasked with researching a topic, synthesizing their learning, identifying the key takeaways, and building content to convey the information to their peers. Additional benefits of reciprocal peer instruction include enhanced verbal and non-verbal communication skills and increased sense of ownership in the learning process [4], [5].

As a complement to peer instruction, peer feedback reinforces active listening and engagement in the learning process [6]. The peer feedback process requires students to evaluate the content and delivery of their peers’ presentations, provide constructive commentary, and develop written communication skills.

At the university level, formal peer instruction is often reserved for final presentations, with the entire duration of class sections dedicated to this practice. Our peer sharing presentation process

is abbreviated and iterative, with each student presenting their work in two to three minutes at four different time points throughout the semester.

The GELC Peer Sharing Presentation Process

Within the GELC's learning strategies course, the peer instruction technique, referred to as peer sharing presentations, includes students selecting an evidence-based strategy of interest from a list curated by the instructor, learning about the selected strategy, creating a set of informative and engaging slides, submitting the slides for grading and formative feedback, presenting their findings to peers, and reflecting on their peers' presentations. Each of the four peer sharing presentations focuses on a different set of personal or professional development topics (Appendix A). The first set of presentations focused on personal development, with topics such as personal accountability, establishing a routine, organizing materials, eating a balanced diet, and stress relief. The second set of presentations focused on learning strategies, with topics such as creating concept maps, interleaving, crafting study guides, and utilizing the Feynman Technique. The third set of presentations focused on topics related to time and energy management. For the final set of presentations, students could choose one area of interest to them and create their own presentation topic. While the purpose of the curated list is to direct students to effective strategies, students have the option of selecting an evidence-based strategy not included on the list with permission from the instructor.

Once a topic is selected, students seek out and utilize high quality sources to research their strategy and create two, and only two, presentation slides about the topic. Sources are deemed high quality when originating from an institution or organization and containing relevant, current evidence to support claims that are made. The slides (Appendix B) must include why the topic is significant or relevant, tips for applying the strategy, and potential cautions or challenges. The small number of required slides is enforced in an attempt to support critical thinking as students are required to be selective in determining the most important information related to their topic. However, like Slidedocs [7], students are encouraged to go beyond what is typically considered PowerPoint formatting (i.e., incomplete sentences as large, bulleted text) and include sufficient detail on each slide through well-designed, aesthetic formatting.

Students present the topics in a modified "SpeedGeek" format [8]. In the adapted format, students have two to three minutes to succinctly present the two slides they have prepared. Presentations occur in rotating pairs or small groups, allowing each student to hear six to eight presentations about various topics during the class period. Following the presentations, students reflect (Appendix C) on the two presentations they found had the greatest impact on them personally, as well as what they plan to apply to their behaviors from the presentations. Students are able to see anonymous feedback provided to them by their peers regarding how their presentation was received by others.

Methods

The effectiveness of peer sharing presentations as a course activity was evaluated through an exploratory qualitative approach. The students who participated in this study (n=100) made up

around 83% of the 120 students in the Fall 2019 GELC cohort. To be included in this research, students had to provide consent for their work in the learning strategies course to be used for research purposes *and* participate in all four rounds of the peer sharing presentation activity. Any student quotes referenced in the current paper utilize pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. A control group was not included in the current study because the peer sharing presentations acted as both 1) the intervention and 2) the data source for evaluation. Therefore, the work of students who did not participate in each of the four rounds was incomplete and could not be evaluated. Implications of not having a control group are presented in the limitations section.

Data collection instruments included student topic selection, student-created presentation slides, and student reflections on their peers' presentations. Subsequently, all data sources were produced by the students. Therefore, these instruments were not objective scales, and the outcomes addressed in this paper are self-reported by students. This decision was made by the research team in order to capture the full extent of potential outcomes in this exploration of a newly implemented instructional tool. Additionally, the goal of the peer sharing presentations is to equip students with skills that will have a long-term impact on their academic performance. With Fall 2019 semester students being the first cohort to utilize this technique, the long-term impact is not yet observable.

Data were analyzed to identify salient themes and highlight impactful experiences with the peer sharing presentation activity. Each of the student submissions were examined systematically and holistically by the program's graduate assistant to identify changes in the quality of individuals' presentations over time. Instructors of the learning strategies course and an affiliated Academic Success Center staff member reviewed the themes to provide validity.

Results

The themes revealed through the exploratory analysis include student growth across self-regulatory, social, and academic outcomes. The broad subthemes of each are discussed below.

Self-Regulatory Outcomes

Through the peer sharing presentation slides and reflections, students demonstrated sharpened communication skills and enhanced critical thinking as the semester progressed. Both of these skills require attention, controlled behaviors, and practice prior to the presentations. Student quotes in support of each of these subthemes can be seen in Table 1.

Communication skills, both verbal and written, were demonstrated through more succinct language and organization of presentation slides. The enthusiasm expressed through vocal intensity and passion was rewarding to witness, as students felt empowered by their research and meaningfulness of their topics. The majority of students referenced their peers' effective communication, including appropriate eye-contact, use of memorable anecdotes, and clear annunciation, when reflecting on the presentations.

Students engaged in critical thinking as they researched a topic and captured the most significant takeaways. Throughout the semester, many students were able to transition from vague tips for implementing their topic to concrete recommendations. These improvements were noted by their peers (Table 1).

Table 1. Self-Regulatory Outcomes Categories and Student Quotes

Category	Student Quotes
Communication Skills	“Your presentation was great, your thoughts were communicated very clearly and all of the information was relevant and useful” (Ethan).
Critical Thinking	“I really liked how you not only focused on people not having enough confidence, but people also having too much confidence. Both of these extremes are issues that many people struggle with and you presented both very well!” (Caitlyn).

Social Outcomes

Most students, either in their presentation slides or in their reflections on their peers’ presentations, revealed enhanced social outcomes in relation to the peer sharing presentations. Subthemes expressed by students include being engaged during their peers’ presentations, exposure to new perspectives, experiencing a sense of belonging and connecting with peers, and disclosing personal information to peers. Student quotes in support of each of these subthemes can be seen in Table 2.

In their reflections, many students reported on specific statistics or interesting facts conveyed through the presentations. This suggests students were engaged and invested in their peers’ presentations. This engagement is further illustrated in students’ selection of topics for their fourth presentation. In the fourth presentation, students were able to choose a strategy they utilized throughout the semester. Three-quarters of students did not repeat a topic they had previously presented and instead selected a topic or strategy presented by one of their peers. This implies that students were impacted by their peers’ presentations throughout the semester and implemented these strategies or techniques within their regular routine. Students’ exposure to new perspectives were well-documented (Table 2), suggesting students were open to the ideas their peers were sharing.

Students’ reflections revealed greater sense of belonging as students made connections with one another through the presentations. As students were able to customize their presentations, they had the opportunity to share their own experiences, successes, and challenges with their presentation topic. Many students expressed facing similar challenges and triumphs as their peers and realized that their experience was not isolated.

Table 2. Social Outcomes Categories and Student Quotes

Category	Student Quotes
Engaged During Peers' Presentations	<p>“One thing that I personally took away from this presentation was that there is a twenty one day period where you can rewire your brain to being more positive just by performing acts of kindness everyday, or journaling a positive experience” (Bailey).</p> <p>“The brain increases its [<i>sic</i>] productivity by about 31% when someone uses positive thoughts” (Evan).</p> <p>“When you doodle you are using both sides of your brain as that helps you remember the topic better as it also serves as a visual representation of the topic” (Dante).</p>
Exposure to New Perspectives	<p>“I would never have thought of taking a break as a goal. I just keep working till I drop. And its [<i>sic</i>] pretty dope how you note your own faults when you said you take breaks almost too often or for too long” (Charles).</p> <p>“The number of possible challenges and the fact that they were all varied from what I said for my presentation of the same topic gave me a different way to view the technique and provided a new take on it I wouldn't have come up with on my own” (Fabio).</p>
Experienced a Sense of Belonging and Connected with Peers	<p>“Thank you for making these slides. This kind of inspired me to give college everything I got and you're right my talents (if I have any) will only take me so far” (Charles).</p> <p>“I liked how she tied her research into Tai Chi and it's [<i>sic</i>] affect [<i>sic</i>]. Turns out that it is really similar to my meditation plans, and I respect that you can incorporate movement into mindfulness” (Sarah).</p>
Disclosed Personal Information to Peers	<p>“The technique works for me because I have a lack of focus due to my ADD” (Finn).</p> <p>“A positive thing is that she talked a lot about the challenges she faced and how she over came them, not just how [creating balance has] been successful for her up to this present time” (Kylia).</p> <p>“I struggle with mental health especially during the school year, so I am definitely going to utilize mental health days” (Meredith).</p>

The presentations gave students a safe, structured space to disclose information about themselves with their peers. Reciprocally, the presentation reflections provided students with the opportunity to credit their peers with giving them inspiration to improve on their weaknesses. For example, several neurodiverse students discussed how their diagnosed differences, including ADHD, learning disabilities, and identification on the autism spectrum, played into the techniques that

they utilized. Many of their peers noticed their mention of these differences, along with other challenges, and commended the students for sharing or included personal anecdotes about challenges that they must work to overcome (Table 2).

Academic Outcomes

The academic outcomes associated with the peer sharing presentations include deepened understanding and use of evidence-based personal and professional strategies that improve learning and strong connections between, and translation of, strategies. Student quotes in support of each of these subthemes can be seen in Table 3.

Through the peer sharing presentation process, students engaged in research related to evidence-based personal and professional strategies to enhance learning outcomes. Evidence of deepened understanding and use of various strategies were abundant in students' presentations. Additionally, students' reflections on their peers' presentations highlight a more thorough understanding of various strategies' purposes, benefits, and potential challenges, as well as how these strategies and techniques can be implemented into their own routines.

Table 3. Academic Outcomes Categories and Student Quotes

Category	Student Quotes
Deepened Understanding and Use of Evidence-Based Strategies	<p>“The Feynman Technique could actually be useful to me because I feel if I am able to teach a little kid a subject then I really understand it” (Blake).</p> <p>“I had never heard of interleaving, so I found it interesting that studying different subjects in quick succession actually helps people learn those subject [<i>sic</i>] faster and better” (Steven).</p> <p>“One thing I got from this presentation was a new understanding of how beneficial [COURSE SUPPORT PROGRAM] can actually be” (Caitlyn).</p>
Connections Between and Translation of Strategies	<p>“I got that [interleaving] was very similar to spacing but for multiple topics. It allows the user to better understand topic through repetition of the same topics but switching off and on each” (Thomas).</p> <p>“The most helpful part...was relating the techniques [for exam prep] used in this method to the ones used in the technique I presented. Being able to provide a connection to what I already knew while still showing how they are unique helped me understand the concept better” (Fabio).</p> <p>“I can see myself using this method with [CLASS #1] and [CLASS #2] since the two classes are similar. The graphs that we learn are discussed in both classes and I feel that it'll help me learn both topics” (Malik).</p>

An additional academic subtheme is supported by students' articulation of translating presentation topics to other contexts and making connections between strategies that they have

used and strategies that are being presented. For example, within their reflections, several students commented on using course support programs (Peer-Assisted Learning, Peer Tutoring, etc.) for a broader array of their STEM courses after a peer presented on the use of a specific service aimed at a specific subject.

Discussion

It is important to note the results of this study are not an argument for a direct link between the peer sharing presentations and the self-regulatory, social, and academic outcomes listed above. Instead, the analysis discussed above reveals students' articulation of these benefits and learning gains in their own words. It is possible other activities and instructional techniques fed into the success of the peer sharing presentations. For example, the peer sharing presentations alone were likely not the sole reason students felt comfortable discussing their personal challenges, but they instead acted as an indicator that many students viewed the learning strategies course as a safe space to disclose information about themselves.

Based on the emergent themes, a key factor contributing to the effectiveness of the peer sharing presentations were the post-presentation reflections. Knowing they would be responsible for recording the most impactful presentations and valuable takeaways, students were more engaged with their peers during the presentations. Additionally, the reflections provided students with a space to offer anonymous feedback, to compliment and receive comments from their peers.

Although the results outlined above do not directly link to the GELC's primary program goal of increasing retention in engineering for this subset of students, the idea that students are engaging in practices that enhance their self-regulatory behaviors, bolster a social support network of peers, and build academic competence suggests that the long-term benefits of the peer sharing presentations, and other practices within the learning strategies course, will contribute to the program's goals. Future research, when more data is available, will be needed to substantiate this supposition.

Limitations

Only students who participated in all four rounds of the peer sharing presentations were included in the current analysis. This could have impacted the perceived results, since the students who fully engaged throughout the semester are more likely to have benefitted from or been affected by the experience than those who did not engage in all four sets of presentations. Future work should consider options for a control or comparison group.

Another limitation is that the data collection instruments do not directly ask students to evaluate their experience with the peer sharing presentations. The results of this work would be enhanced with student interviews or reflections on the peer sharing presentations as a whole. The work would also be strengthened through multimedia data, such as video recordings of the students during the presentations in class.

The current study focuses on data collected from one semester's implementation of the peer sharing presentations. Additional research should consider both the long-term effects of the peer sharing presentations for students and the impact of the peer sharing presentations across multiple cohorts.

Implications for Practitioners

What Did We Learn from This Experience?

Broadly, the peer sharing presentations are an effective instructional technique that promotes student engagement and active learning. Through an investigation of student artifacts and comments, the exploratory analysis in this paper confirmed the instructors' anecdotal evidence and observations during peer sharing presentations, revealing that the benefits of the peer sharing presentations are holistic, going beyond academics and into self-regulatory and social spheres of student development.

What Will We Keep in Future Iterations?

Based on instructor observations and student data, several components of the peer sharing presentation process should be retained in future iterations of the activity. Perhaps most significantly, the complimentary feedback mechanisms should continue to be utilized. One aspect of the anonymous feedback provided by students through peer reflections is it creates a space for classmates to engage in conversations around their peers' presentations. The second aspect of the feedback involves the instructor's or graduate teaching assistant's grading (carried out against a rubric) paired with timely, formative feedback. This feedback provided students with targeted commentary to guide improvements. This complete feedback process prompts students to remain accountable to themselves, their peers, and their instructors.

Additionally, a key component of the peer sharing presentations is the iterative nature of the assignment. Based on the feedback students acquire following each presentation round, students are given the opportunity to hone their presentation preparation and execution skills.

The choice of topic component, though not directly analyzed in the current study, also seemed to be a significant factor contributing to student buy-in. In the peer presentation reflections, many students applauded the presenters for their passion and enthusiasm in statements such as "She seemed passionate about the topic she was presenting which made the presentation more memorable" (Callie), or "I enjoyed how enthusiastic she was about her technique and how much of an impact it made in her studying habits" (Bethany). Without students having the ability to choose their topic, interest and motivation, and thus passion, would likely be diminished.

What Will We Change in Future Iterations?

In order to pinpoint students' opinions of the peer sharing presentation assignment and its effectiveness, a specific instrument or survey that elicits student commentary related to the presentations as an instructional tool should be created and released.

How Could This Practice be Used by STEM Educators?

The peer sharing presentations were embedded within the learning strategies course for first-year engineering students enrolled in the GELC at Clemson University. However, we believe that educators teaching STEM content can also incorporate peer sharing presentations into their course. This instructional technique could be employed by educators interested in developing students' ability to approach real-world problems through a critical lens and present their understanding of a topic succinctly. We recommend the use of peer sharing presentations at the beginning of a new unit or topic, as this activity affords students the opportunity to explore new ideas.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current paper was to describe an active learning technique, referred to as peer sharing presentations, implemented within a learning strategies course and to explore its effects on first-year engineering students enrolled in the course. The findings of the study suggest that the peer sharing presentations contribute to positive self-regulatory, social, and academic outcomes for students. The iterative nature, succinct structure, and formative feedback mechanisms are key elements of the implementation and overall effectiveness of the technique. Despite the absence of long-term data validating the effectiveness of this strategy, the findings of this study suggest peer sharing presentations are an instructional tool that can be utilized by other engineering educators at the university level to provide holistic benefits to students.

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Appendix A: Sample Peer Sharing Presentation Topics

Round 1: Life Management Strategies	Balanced Diet and Importance of Nutrition Effective Communication (i.e. interacting with professors) Health and Wellness (i.e. exercise, meditation) Organization (i.e. using a planner, to-do lists)
Round 2: Learning Strategies	Concept Maps Doodling Feynman Technique Interleaving Peer-Assisted Learning Spacing Effect Studying with Quizzes
Round 3: Time Management Strategies	Balancing Academics and a Social Life Creating an Effective To-Do List Managing Energy Mindfulness
Round 4: Personal Success Strategy	Attending Office Hours Exercise Interleaving Reviewing Notes Taking Practice Exams Using Academic Success Center Resources Using a Planner

Appendix B: Sample Peer Sharing Presentation Slides Instructions

The PURPOSE of this activity is to share with each other effective development practices.

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In class, each person in your team chose one of the following topics:

- How to Manage Time, Reduce Stress, and Increase Happiness
- All it Takes is 10 Mindful Minutes
- Three Tips to Achieve Academic Success While Enjoying a Social Life
- Laziness Does not Exist
- Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time
- How to Write an Effective To Do List

You must choose TWO resources about your topic. The FIRST resource can be found on this list [reference list provided to students separately], which we are providing for you. You must find a SECOND resource. Use this guide [guide provided to students separately] to find a quality resource to research your topic.

Prepare a 3-minute talk. You must create a PowerPoint slide deck to accompany your talk containing EXACTLY 2 slides.

- Slide #1: Your name, your topic, your resources. You must provide a URL link so we can find the resources you used.
- Slide #2: State why the practice is important for personal development. List the top two recommendations you have for a user to implement this technique. Also include what difficulties or challenges someone might face with it. What may someone else struggle with when implementing this technique?

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Post your slide deck to the assignment as a PDF by [DATE] at [TIME]. Your slides will be downloaded and printed for you before class on [DATE] when you will present your topic - you do not need to print your slides.

You will have 3 minutes to discuss your topic one-on-one with other classmates in pairs and we will use a "SpeedGeek" format. Note the format is individual discussion - you will not give a presentation on your topic to the entire class.

Appendix C: Sample Peer Sharing Presentation Reflection Instructions

Identify the two best presentations you heard today and share some information about them:

Best presentation #1

Name:

Topic:

One positive thing you would tell the speaker:

One thing you got from the presentation:

Best presentation #2

Name:

Topic:

One positive thing you would tell the speaker:

One thing you got from the presentation: