PASS TOOLKIT

PEER ASSISTED STUDY SESSIONS
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What is PASS?  Implementing PASS
Maintaining PASS  PASS Facilitators
Evaluating PASS  PASS Activities
Troubleshooting  References
PASS is a student centered, collaborative learning program that provides a student focused learning environment. PASS encourages interactions between peers more than traditional tutor focused tutorials or task orientated laboratory sessions, and therefore enables social transition. Students who have successfully completed the topic are trained as PASS facilitators to conduct the sessions. Sessions are designed to enhance and support lecture material while giving students the opportunity to ask questions and to receive constructive and timely feedback without having to directly approach academic staff. Students work together to improve study strategies in addition to understanding and consolidation of topic content.

- PASS is a student based tutorial system designed for first year undergraduates.
- Sessions are typically facilitated by second and third year students that have achieved a High Distinction in the same topic.
- Typically PASS sessions are run in relatively small groups (15-28), with an aim to facilitate first year student transition to University. Each session is run by two facilitators who work together to guide students through activities and discussion.
- Sessions are focused on providing students with an opportunity to build a stronger understanding of topic material by providing a more independent style of learning as is required for university study.

This toolkit aims to help you consider all the possibilities and requirements for PASS to run smoothly and efficiently within your topic. It will provide you with an understanding of the requirements of setting up and maintaining your PASS program and some helpful hints for when things don’t go as planned.
How students benefit from PASS

Peer learning programs like PASS have been around for approximately 35 years resulting in a vast amount of literature documenting the benefits. These benefits include:

- Improved academic performance (increased mean exam & final grade, see fig. 1).
- Increased retention into higher year topics.
- Increased persistence towards and timely graduation.
- Enables transition of first year students to university, both academically and socially.
- Development of efficient study skills.
- Increased efficiency of study during PASS as compared to individual study.
- Enhanced learning via provision of immediate feedback and discussion of difficult problems.
- Students are motivated to keep up with weekly topic content.
- Greater student satisfaction in topics.

![Mean Final Course Grades of SI and non-SI Participants by Academic Discipline](image)

*National SI Data: Winter 1998 – Summer 2003*

Figure 1 (above) shows the summary data collected from 53 institutions (61,868 students) in the U.S. that run Supplemental Instruction (SI) programs (The precursor to PASS). These results are from a range of different institution types and show that PASS is effective in improving grades across a wide range of disciplines (International Centre for Supplemental Instruction 2003).
Can PASS Help You?

Determine how your topic could benefit from PASS

PASS has a high impact in topics that have proven to be difficult for students academically, for example, those topics with a high failure rate, or high attrition (Arendale 2001; Topping 1996).

Topics with large student numbers, whereby students have less opportunity to interact with lecturers have also shown to benefit greatly from PASS (Arendale 2001; Topping 1996).

Consequently, PASS has proven to be very helpful in overcoming first year transition issues. New first year students can meet each other, they can discuss problems with a peer who has recently undergone the same process and can get help with difficult topic concepts (University of Bournemouth, 2006).

Assess the suitability PASS to your topic......

PASS is a tool that can be used in any topic at any level, however, it has been found to have greatest impact in topics that fit the following criteria:

*Does your topic have a high failure or attrition rate?*
*Does your topic have a large number of students enrolled?*
*Does your topic deal with difficult concepts or ideas?*
*Is your topic a first year topic?*

If your topic has any of these attributes then PASS may be useful to you and your students.
PASS Pedagogy and Practice

The Theory Behind PASS

Peer assisted study approaches are supported by social constructivist theories about learning (Topping, 1996; Luca & Clarkson, 2002; Harland, 2003). Social constructivism is supported by the theories of Piaget on assimilation and accommodation (Luca & Clarkson, 2002); and Vygotsky on the scaffolding of learning and the Zone of Proximal Development (Harland, 2003). Notably, on the role of a peers in learning Vygotsky wrote (1978 cited by Harland 2003):

“[The Zone of Proximal Development] is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”

In PASS, students build on their understanding of topics by working together in a non-threatening environment. PASS avoids the stigma associated with remedial classes by focusing on subjects that are high-risk in terms of student failure and attrition, rather than focusing on students who are in high-risk categories.

The U.S. Department of Education has certified the success of supplemental programs such as PASS as exemplary and commended them for being the first research based programs to contribute academically to achievement and graduation rates (Arendale 2001).

What does a PASS Session look like?

At Flinders University a PASS session will typically have between 15-28 students, and 2 PASS Facilitators. Sessions are informal; however they may contain structured activities for the class to work through in small groups. The relaxed environment of PASS enables students to seek help from their facilitators without the anxiety associated with approaching academics. *Most importantly PASS Facilitators are not teachers so they do not provide students with the answers to problems*. Facilitators guide students towards discovering the answer themselves, which, from an educational perspective is much more rewarding.
The PASS program can be adapted to suit your topic and your students. Once you have established what you expect PASS to achieve in your topic you can start to consider how you will achieve this through the structure, activities and content of the PASS sessions. Each session may incorporate a combination of different content styles, or you may choose to try different types throughout the semester. Use the following table as a guide to which type of session content will target your goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Content</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>Topic coordinator is likely to be aware of problem concepts and be able to assign time within the PASS sessions for students to discuss these.</td>
<td>Employment of staff member to structure the content. If facilitators are used to structured activities they may not be qualified to determine content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Specific</td>
<td>Content deals with difficult concepts that are specific to your topic. Students who have already mastered these concepts can offer assistance to other students and in doing so consolidate their own understanding.</td>
<td>Students may require a solid foundation of generic skills before they are able to tackle these difficult concepts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment with topic content</td>
<td>Immediately addresses issues raised in lectures. Students develop skills that are immediately useful to them and are therefore more likely to retain those skills. Students are able to grasp the current content of the topic and are more able to keep up with the topic requirements.</td>
<td>May be difficult to ensure that skills are directly or obviously related to the current topic content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>Provides generic skills to enable students to deal with academic requirements, such as essay writing or critical thinking. See the ‘Examples of Generic Activities’ pages at the end of this document.</td>
<td>Some students may not benefit from a broadly taught skill and may require a more specific problem based approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured</td>
<td>Students are able to concentrate on specific difficulties that they are having.</td>
<td>The session may lose focus if not facilitated well and possibly lead to students wasting time. More motivated students may feel that time is better spent in private study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Things to consider when implementing a PASS program

Like any university program PASS will require special attention during implementation. Below are some measures to consider when setting up your PASS program.

Logistics
- Timetabling → sessions and staff
- Staffing → recruitment and management
- Room availability → sessions and meetings
- Materials → Development of materials and provision for disposables
- Class size → Consider the structure sessions and available resources

Promotion of PASS within the topic
- Develop a positive PASS culture → PASS is productive and fun, NOT remedial and tedious
- What is the policy within your school regarding ‘promoting’ to students?

Deciding whether to make attendance compulsory
- Consider what you want PASS to do for your topic.
- The ethos of PASS is to avoid the remedial stigma that other programs may have.
- Will struggling students feel more comfortable attending if all students attend?
- Are students engaging well with your topic?

Finance and Administration
- Consider what it will cost to implement PASS in your topic.
- Payment of PASS facilitators → For example in the School of Biology facilitators are paid at the ‘D2’ rate and there are two facilitators per session (for up to 28 students).
- Cost of materials → This largely depends on the structure that you choose to use within sessions.
- Cost of preparing materials for structured sessions → Who will be preparing for any structured sessions? If facilitators are required to do this you will need to consider the time and cost involved.
- How many sessions will you have? → This will depend on the number of students enrolled in your topic, your preferred session sizes and what times and venues are available for sessions.
- Cost of staffing → How many hours per week?
- Cost of training → Who will develop and conduct training?
Your PASS Facilitators are the key to your program running successfully! The use of second and third year students to facilitate sessions is done essentially to break down the barriers between academic staff and students. Student peers are easier to approach and have a very recent appreciation for the hurdles that students in that topic may be having. In addition, PASS facilitating offers high achieving students a valuable opportunity to develop their graduate attributes, with the potential for retaining them as postgraduates within your discipline or school. Consider the following to determine how to maximize the benefits to you and your PASS facilitators.

What are the benefits of becoming a PASS facilitator?
- Improved confidence
- Learning new skills
- Interacting with peers
- Monetary reward
- Enhanced understanding and retention of subject matter covered
- Paid employment related to studies
- Work experience for c.v.
- Potential increased probability of graduate work
- An increased feeling of belonging to the university
- Potential credit for a topic

What makes a good PASS facilitator?
- Facilitators will need to be able to promote discussion amongst students
- PASS facilitators are currently or have recently experienced being an undergraduate and therefore have empathy and an understanding of issues relating to students that can only come from recent experience
- Being a good listener and a desire to participate

How will you choose your PASS facilitators?
- Promote open application from all past students
- Invite high achieving students to apply
- Make it seem like a reward so that students want to compete to be chosen

What will the selection process involve?
- Written essay
- Group or Individual interview
- Remember some of these processes may be important in developing graduate skills, from which all students may benefit

Training and Development
- What type of initial and ongoing training will you implement?
- Will you use the same facilitators or invite other students to apply?
**PASS Facilitators**

**Session Facilitation**  
One of the central tenets of the PASS pedagogy is that PASS facilitators *do not provide answers or new content and are not involved in assessment*. In this way student participants can construct their own knowledge, which in turn results in deeper learning and understanding of topic material. PASS facilitators still have a big responsibility and, in addition to having a firm grasp of the topic material, are required to undergo initial and ongoing training and mentoring by the program coordinator.

As an additional resource facilitators can refer to the [PASS Facilitator Training Manual](#), which is a substantial compilation of information that can be used as an ongoing reference for PASS facilitators. Below are some issues that are covered in this manual and should be paid special attention to by those training future PASS facilitators.

**Meet and greet activities**  
Building rapport, remember that not all students attend the first session so this should be repeated throughout the semester

**Group facilitation**  
How to begin, guide and close a session. Discuss issues regarding behaviour management

**Generic Skills**  
The importance of imparting generic study skills and tips (e.g. note taking and using databases) and information exchange that aids in transition and orientation. Students may ask their facilitators questions that they may not ask the topic coordinator, such as ‘Where can I photocopy information?’

**Exam revision**  
PASS facilitators impart invaluable information about techniques for efficient exam revision based on their own experiences.
Maintaining your PASS program

Coordinating PASS

Maintaining your PASS program will be important for staff, facilitators and students alike. PASS is a flexible program which can be adapted to your requirements, but to ensure it is successful within your topic you will need to consider the following and establish how your program will run efficiently.

Roles of Staff, Facilitators and Students

- What level of involvement will you have as the topic coordinator?
- Will you require a dedicated PASS coordinator or by existing staff?
- What will PASS facilitators be paid to do?
- Will you involve the Staff Development Unit (training) and the Student Learning Centre (generic learning material)?
- What will the time commitments be for:
  - Meetings?
  - Coordination?
  - Content preparation?
  - Attendance at sessions?

PASS Facilitators

PASS facilitators are the key to your PASS program and on the following page we cover this area more specifically. However, you will need to consider the following in terms of ongoing maintenance:

- How you will groom, select and recruit facilitators?
- What selection criteria you will use (written application, grades based, individual or group interviews)?
- How you will train facilitators?
- How you will maintain supervision of your PASS facilitators?
Maintaining your PASS program

Maintaining enthusiasm

One of the most important aspects of a well working PASS program is continued enthusiasm and confidence in the program. Consider the following ways to maintain enthusiasm within your PASS program:

For Students
- Develop the culture of PASS by incorporating fun learning activities into the program to encourage the feeling that PASS positively contributes to the topic experience and transition.
- Re-iterate the importance of attending PASS and its usefulness.
- Ensure that students are aware that they are expected to ask questions and participate within sessions.
- You may need to ‘promote’ PASS to your students within lectures by simply mentioning or discussing PASS to entrench in within the topic.

For PASS Facilitators
- Set regular meeting times 4 Use this time as a debrief and include peer facilitators and staff within the topic to discuss how the sessions are being received and if the facilitators are having any problems.
- Ask the facilitators to suggest any improvements that could be made.
- Run through with the facilitators any difficulties that you think the students may raise in the next session.
- How you will provide support and feedback to your PASS facilitators?
- Can involvement in the program count towards an assessment component for PASS facilitators?
- Using the PASS Facilitators Handbook.
- Providing evaluation tools for facilitators and students (see the example for student evaluation of facilitators)

Every member of a team needs to take responsibility for team morale and motivation. The success of PASS within a topic relies on commitment to providing a stimulating and positive environment for students. It is important that staff involved with implementing any PASS program remain positive and focused on the potential benefits of the program. In this way, and by remaining organized, sessions can run as smoothly as possible and solutions to any initial teething problems are more likely to be identified and implemented.
No program will be trouble free 100% of the time, especially during the first year of implementation; therefore we have provided some tips about what can be done to address things if and when they go wrong.

**Poor session attendance**
Might be a result of:
- Lack of awareness ❯ Is promotion required?
- Inconvenient or unpopular times ❯ Consider rescheduling.
- Voluntary attendance ❯ Consider implementing compulsory attendance, show the effect of PASS attendance on grades in the lectures, remind students to attend when in lectures, tell students they will get tips on exams within the PASS sessions, tell students they will learn skills that will enable them to predict the content of exams.

**PASS Facilitators taking on an inappropriate role**
This may be in the form of the following:
- Directly teaching new material.
- Dominating the discussion.
- Working poorly with their partner facilitator.
- Not prepared for sessions.
These problems may often be overcome by discussing the role of a PASS facilitator and your specific topic expectations. If a facilitator has not experienced PASS within their own studies a role play of a PASS session may be useful in order to understand the appropriate way to facilitate their own PASS session. PASS facilitators often have little or no experience in leading groups of students so it may be helpful to meet and run through a typical session with your facilitators.

**Students are uncooperative**
The [PASS Facilitator Handbook](#) has suggestions for managing uncooperative students but here are some issues to consider:
- Appropriate facilitators or behavior by facilitators ❯ Student behavior may be an indicator of this. See above.
- Appropriate content in sessions ❯ Consider the structure, level of engagement and difficulty (too easy or hard) of content in the PASS setting.
- Are students having issues with transition to university (teaching styles, workloads etc)? ❯ Advice on transition issues are available through the [Transition to University Office](#).
- Are students shy? ❯ Are meet and greet activities needed? Would smaller groups reduce feelings of intimidation?
- Are various cultural considerations being addressed? ❯ Advice on culturally inclusive practices is available from the [Equal Opportunity Unit](#).
- is the behaviour collective or centered around one or two individuals? ❯ What does the inappropriate behavior consist of? Consider what the real reason for the behaviour may be. Personalities, behavioural difficulties etc.
Evaluating PASS within your school

The evaluation of PASS within your topic will be a useful tool that will enable you to map the progress of the program and your students.

Evaluation
There are many different forms evaluation can take. Consider the following:

- Effectiveness reflected in retention of students
- Ongoing enrollments within disciplines
- Student grades
- Student satisfaction surveys [Student Evaluation of PASS](#)
- Student evaluations of PASS facilitators [SET PASS Facilitator](#)
- Feedback from PASS facilitators
- Feedback from coordinators

Publishing Results of Evaluation

- Evaluations can provide not only useful feedback for topic coordinators and facilitators but also provide results for academic publications
- This data can be useful for ongoing improvement of the topic
- Consider the University’s requirements for ethics approval
- Seek assistance from the [Academic Development Unit](#) for publishing in the field of tertiary education research
Examples of Generic PASS activities

Many activities used in PASS sessions address various generic skills that are essential for students’ success at university. Activities can be modified to incorporate specific skills for particular courses or more broad skills that will be useful throughout a student’s time at university, such as effective studying techniques. Here we present just three of an endless number of activities possible for incorporation into a PASS session. See central repository for additional examples of activities.

Interpreting Journal Articles

This activity helps students to understand the importance of using current journal articles as well as enabling them to interpret what they are reading. Many students in their first year of university are still unaware of how to find and use journal articles. This activity enables PASS facilitators to discuss the importance of using current articles for assignment work, how to access articles via the library and how to interpret the information presented.

Materials

• Copies (one for each student) of a single journal article relating to particular field or topic.
• Article needs to be broken down (highlighting or numbering paragraphs prior to photocopying works well) into major sections for students to discuss.

Activity

• PASS facilitators discuss the importance of using up-to-date journal articles and where to find them. Students are advised of the overall topic of the journal article they are about to examine.
• Class breaks up into several smaller groups where each group will read and discuss a particular section of the journal article.
• Each group reads the abstract plus their specified section.
• Once each group has discussed their section and come to a conclusion about the relevant parts they report back to the class. Approximately half of the session should be used for reading and discussing in small groups and half the time left for reporting back to the class and class discussion.
• By the end of the activity students should be able to understand the entire article and will have had the opportunity to see how other students interpret the article.
Examples of Generic PASS activities

Concept Mapping
This activity leads students through the process of creating and using concept maps for study purposes. Concept maps graphically illustrate the relationships between pieces of information. By using concept maps students develop their understanding by building upon existing knowledge and relating it to new material.

Materials
- Large sheets of paper
- Markers, pens or chalk
- List of words relating to a current issue in your topic (one list per table)

Activity
- Students work in small groups. If groups are difficult to motivate it may be useful to assign a task to each group member (e.g. scribe, ideas person, reporter)
- Using the list of words provided, students are to link together important concepts using arrows and joining phrases.
- When concept maps are completed students exchange maps with another group and discuss the choices of concept groupings and any alterations they would make.
Logic Activity

Many students benefit from studying logic within their topic. This activity is especially useful for topics that require students to develop reasoning skills. This short activity can be used to prompt discussion amongst students.

*Note: PASS facilitators may need to try this activity together before working with students as some logic activities can appear difficult on first attempts.

Materials

- See attached logic multiple choice questions
- Blank answer sheets

Activity

- Students answer the multiple choice questions individually without sharing answers with other students
- Students hand up their answer sheets anonymously
- Each question and responses are discussed and the class decides on the correct response
- Class results can be tabulated and displayed. This is especially useful for showing students how data can be collected.

More examples of activities can be found in the central repository for Flinders University use.
Who else can help?

As many of you would know there are a number of departments and resources available within Flinders University. Here are a few that you may find useful whilst setting up our PASS program:

**Staff development and Training Unit** — Can advise or be involved in training of PASS facilitators.

**The Equal Opportunity Unit** — Can advise on cultural inclusive practices

**Student Learning Support Centre** — Can advise or be involved in the development of PASS session content, particularly generic skills.

**Transition to University Office** can offer information on transition issues and the implementation of activities to combat transition.

The **Co-ordinators of PASS in the School of Biology** and Flinders University (and other schools as they develop their own programs) are happy to offer information on their own experiences and to aid in training sessions.

If you want to see how successful other programs have been there is also a multitude of information available on the internet on peer assisted learning programs (PASS, PAL—peer assisted learned, and supplemental instruction). Flinders University has also compiled a review of relevant literature available [here](#).


