SYMBΩL

Mathematics Peer Assisted Learning

Hints, Tips and FAQs for PAL Leaders

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This document has been designed to address common questions and queries which new PAL Leaders may have about their role, at all points in the PAL process - before, during and after PAL sessions. It also aims to advise on some more general matters which may arise in the process of leading PAL sessions, as well as briefly discussing the logistical and administrative sides of the process.

Introduction

If you are reading this document, then you're probably a Peer Assisted Learning Leader in Loughborough University's Department of Mathematics. Congratulations, and thank you for volunteering to take part in the PAL scheme! If this is your first year of leading PAL sessions then you might, understandably, have some questions about how it all works (if you're returning as a PAL leader, you'll probably know much of the information in this document already!).

This 'Frequently Asked Questions' document has been compiled in order to give you answers to some common PAL-specific questions, which you may find yourself encountering throughout the academic year. It will deal with scenarios that may occur during a PAL session, as well as considerations that you (as leaders) may need to take into account outside of session time, either before or after a session. Further, it aims to cover some of the important logistical / administrative elements of PAL, as well as commenting about the role, responsibilities and requirements of PAL leaders.

However, not all of this information may be useful to you at one time! This FAQ may function better if it is dipped into & out of when required. As such, the Table of Contents below can be used for handy navigation around the document. However, where possible, I have tried to order topics chronologically - so that you can read this through from front to back if you want to!

Each topic will contain a number of bullet points, with questions in **bold** type. The answer follows immediately below. Answers should be seen as indications of good practice only, and not as exhaustive - indeed, a common feature of PAL is that a variety of situations could occur each week, and so this guide may not be able to give you all the answers to your questions. Nonetheless, I hope you find the document insightful, and a helpful read when it comes to tackling PAL-specific queries.

Contents

FAQs

Before the first PAL Session

- **How should I let second year students know about PAL support and the PAL sessions?**

What has worked well in the past has been to go (as a group of leaders) into one of the first week's lectures in the PAL module - after first agreeing it with the lecturer, of course! - and introducing yourselves to the students then. Whilst you're there, you can tell them what PAL is about, briefly, and mention when the sessions will start (e.g. if there won't be PAL sessions running in Week 1). This is also the best time to get students to sign up to which session they want to be in (if you're assigning students to sessions in this manner).

Another way to promote PAL to students is to do it in the first email you and the other PAL leaders in your group send out to the students. This will necessarily be a welcome email, but you should try to sell PAL to them then so that they will want to come to your session!

- **What should we put in the welcome email?**

Keep it informal and friendly in tone - because that's what PAL's about! You don't want to scare people away before the first session. As for content, introduce yourselves as PAL leaders to them, and mention briefly what PAL is in case they haven't heard of it yet. You should try to explain a little of what the sessions will involve, if possible, to them. One great thing to mention is that you will go over different problems to the ones on their problem sheets during PAL - and thus attending PAL will give students access to extra resources. This is a major selling point of the sessions, along with the friendly, supportive environment they take place in.

Of course, you shouldn't try to force people to come to PAL - as it won't be how everyone likes to learn best. Something like "looking forward to seeing you next Thursday" to sign off is good.

- **How much should/can I prepare for the first session?**

Quite a lot actually! The first few sessions will take a fairly long time to prepare for, but the more times you prepare for a session, the quicker your overall planning process becomes. I know that a lot will be uncertain before the first session, but you can still map out almost all of how the session will go.

You can: consider which table/chairs layout might suit the first session; work out a welcome, introduction to PAL and icebreaker activity to run in the session; think about how much time you're going to spend on each one; and even plan a quick maths activity to do at the end, to get people comfortable working with each other!

N.B. Initially, it can be difficult to work out how much time things should take up in your session. Maybe have a couple of extra things planned for the first session that you can fall back on if students get through the first few tasks quite quickly. Eventually, you'll have a good idea of how fast your group will get through tasks, so you can adjust timings accordingly.

During a PAL Session

- **Do we need to take a register of attendance during PAL sessions?**

Yes, take one at the start of every session. There is a template available online if you don't want to take one on a blank piece of paper. Make sure to have a few with you, in case lots of people turn up to your session.

The information about who's going to PAL, and how many times they go, is vital for doing statistical analysis of whether PAL may be contributing to improving people's module scores. But if this information isn't collected and then passed on to the right person, then we can't work out if PAL is doing a good job or not!

- **What do I do if nobody turns up to the session?**

Firstly, it's worth saying that attendance at PAL sessions is quite variable - one week, you could have 18/20 students turn up, then next week 10, then maybe only 2 or 3 the week after. So don't be surprised if the number of people in each session fluctuates a bit. Later on in term, students will have coursework deadlines, class tests to revise for and other pressures on their time. Also, more students will 'try PAL out' at the start of the semester - to see if it works for them - and some may not come back after a while.

If it does happen, however, that no students attend your PAL session one week, then first of all try not to be disheartened. It will almost certainly be down to when the session is timetabled for, or the students' deadlines, and nothing to do with you as leaders. The most sensible thing to do if nobody shows is to wait a few minutes - give it about 10 from when the session is meant to start - just in case the students are running late from a previous lecture etc. If nobody still shows, then you should report that nobody's turned up to one of the members of staff who coordinate the PAL scheme.

Clearly, there's no use in you running a PAL session for an empty classroom, or just for the benefit of your fellow leaders (who have also done the module, and already passed it!), so perhaps spend the hour doing some of your own work, or discussing/planning what to do for the next session. It's probably best to assume any one no-show is an anomaly, and that your students will be back next week (possibly with a good reason why they didn't attend . . .).

N.B. If no people are turning up to your PAL sessions on a regular basis, speak to an appropriate member of staff ASAP.

- **What if a student asks me a question I don't know the answer to?**

This is incredibly common! PAL leaders can't prepare answers to every question that could come up. And besides, every student is different in what they can understand and what they will find difficult. It's unrealistic to assume that you as a leader would be an expert on everything to do with the module - you're not a lecturer, and you do have other modules to study for!

Almost every PAL session I have been in there has been a question I couldn't answer immediately. You have a variety of options to deal with it. The best is to ask other students if they know the answer - then you've facilitated a mathematical discussion between peers about the module, which will hopefully be helpful for all the students involved.

Another option, if no student is able or willing to have a go, is to ask your fellow PAL leader(s). You'll never be in the session alone as a leader (hopefully), so maybe another leader will know.

You can also offer to come back to the student, either later on in the session or during next session, so that you can think the problem over or ask the lecturer about it.

N.B. Having said that, a decent grasp of the lecture notes (in terms of structure, content and general 'flow' of the course), a good knowledge of the language of the course and knowing what each object in a theorem etc actually is (i.e. Is it a function? A vector? A set?) can be really helpful for your confidence as a leader, when it comes to tackling problems from a module you did at least a year ago. If you end up learning so much that your PAL module becomes the 7th module you're doing in a semester, though, then you've obviously tried to prepare too much!

- **Students aren't contributing to the session. What can we do to make it happen?**

In my experience, it takes a few weeks for students to actually realise that PAL sessions don't work in the same way as lectures do, even if you tell them that at the start. Students will initially assume that all they have to do in PAL sessions is to (passively) absorb information presented to them by the PAL leaders.

After experiencing the sessions - and perhaps having got to know the students and the leaders better - students will hopefully intuit that they need to rethink their approach to the sessions. I have seen this happen - students suddenly become more actively involved in discussions, supporting each other and contributing to a session in general!

So if it's the first few sessions in particular, then this is quite normal - try to get volunteers for answers etc first, then perhaps pick people to contribute if nobody comes forward. It's possible that the first few weeks you'll have to do more starting and shaping of discussions or exercises within the group.

Sometimes students can be persuaded to contribute through the offering of sweets (!) or if you suggest that you will not ask them a more difficult question later! One other strategy that works well is to get a student who contributes to the group to choose who next answers a question, or carries the discussion on etc. That way, they're in control of the session, and a conversation carries on.

- **Students have already completed the task that we planned to set them. Now what?**

If this happens at the start of the session, and your students tell you this, then you'll have to adapt your session plan quite drastically, straight away! I've had this happen a few times, and it usually happens because the PAL leaders struggle to know exactly how far through a chapter the students and lecturer have gone. Such difficulties could be minimised by asking the lecturer where exactly he or she is covering up to this week; you could ask students over email, Facebook etc how far they've got as well.

There's little value to be had by doing an exercise all the students have already done (obviously) and so your best bet might be to throw the session open to the students. Ask them what they would find most helpful in today's session - perhaps a group discussion/exercise, or everyone working individually on their questions & lecture notes, with PAL leaders offering help when needed. There might even be other (mathematical) things that the students want to do in your session.

Either this, or you might have some other exercises planned to begin with, as back up stuff should the students have all done the work for the first exercises already!

- **Students are working at different rates within the PAL group. Now what?**

This will always happen, because each student will have done a different amount of preparation and problem sheet work before the PAL session each week. In addition, some people may find previous chapters easier to understand, whilst others may struggle with concepts from earlier on in the course.

It's perfectly fine to be doing a variety of questions in a PAL session, from different chapters and different problem sheets. A student who is struggling to understand material from Chapter 2, say, won't necessarily get much out of your planned exercise on Chapter 4, though. Perhaps if you spot a situation like that happening, suggest that individual students can work on whatever would help them most - even if that isn't your whole-group discussion - and you'll be happy to help with questions on anything to do with the module so far.

As long as you're supportive and encouraging of everyone, wherever they are up to in the notes, people are usually OK about being a bit behind in PAL sessions - unlike in a tutorial, where they maybe could feel more pressure to be 'at the same stage' as everyone else there.

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If it happens that you see certain students (or groups of students!) finishing your exercises quicker than others on a regular basis, the trick is to still give them tasks to do in the session, so that they are still engaging and getting something out of PAL. You could maybe engage them in conversation about their answers to your task, discuss how they would go about solving further questions on the problem sheets, or get them involved in helping the other students out who may not have finished yet.

This last idea in particular is good - as having to discuss and express mathematical ideas clearly and concisely to your peers can be tricky, but will definitely make sure they're engaging with the session. It'll also probably improve their presentation, communication and certain aspects of their mathematical skills. (Plus you as a leader can take a back seat, and let the students do most of the interacting, teach each other and take control of their own learning ...!)

After a Session

- **I'm planning the next session. What should I do if far more / far less students than we planned for turn up to the session?**

As mentioned previously, it can sometimes be tricky to know exactly how many will show up to your session. You may start to see a pattern forming after the first few sessions, and for the purposes of planning this might be a good place to start from when guessing how many students will show up next week.

You may get lots more students attending in certain session, and a good tip to deal with this is to split the students up into smaller subgroups. Maybe suggest students form into groups of 4 or 5, then set each group a different task to work on. That way, an otherwise large group of 20 becomes slightly more manageable between two or three PAL leaders! Each leader can spend some time talking to each small group

throughout the session, making sure everyone's doing OK.

It's slightly less tricky to deal with a smaller than expected group of students who show up. As the group is smaller than you planned, you may still be able to run the exercises you planned beforehand; alternatively, it may make more sense to adapt an exercise for 15 students into a similar task for 5 students, say. In any case, with less students in the room you can spend more time with each, dealing with individual queries. This can sometimes be really helpful for students in your group - I've seen people start to understand things tremendously well when they've had close to one-on-one working opportunities with both their peers and the PAL leaders.

- **Should I contact the students in my group every week?**

Absolutely. Reminding students weekly that their PAL session will be on - and also giving details of it, so everyone knows where to go! - is crucial in keeping it in students' minds. That way, more will hopefully be interested in attending - though of course, you can't force people to go!

A weekly message to them (via email, Facebook, or whichever way you want to do it) can also indicate what stuff you have planned to go over in the next session. It's also a good opportunity for you to ask students directly if they have something they'd like you leaders to go over next time.

- **We didn't finish everything we wanted to in the PAL session. What should we do?**

It's up to you really. You can finish off what you started during the next session, as a starter exercise; you can go on to new material next time, but ask if students have any questions at the start of the next session; you can work out the last bits of a question before the next session and suggest how students could finish the exercise off themselves. Or a combination of all of the above!

Timings for exercises, or specific sections of a session, can be tricky to allocate. You may not always be able to cover everything you wanted to in a session. There is never a set plan for each session - nobody's going to tell you "You must cover X in the third PAL session!", for example. You'll have to decide what would work best for the students in your group.

- **How should I organise an activity, or lay out the tables, for a PAL session about _____ ?**

I can't help you at all for this one! In the same way as there are no rules for what content you cover in the sessions, there is no one 'best way' to lead a session - it's all down to your judgment and experience as leaders.

Rearrange the room however you want to, present the material however you would like, organise an activity in any way that you think students could learn something from. You have access to a variety of SYMBOL resources which may be of use to you when you're planning PAL sessions, but you don't have to use them at all!

This may seem very challenging to you (and it *is* tough having to make so many decisions about the sessions, at least for the first few weeks!), but as with anything it will get easier to organise these activities with time. For one thing, you'll find a structure to your sessions which works for you as leaders; furthermore, you'll see that your PAL students respond well to certain approaches or layouts within a session.

- **One of my PAL leaders has told me they can't make the next session. What should I do?**

A PAL leader should never have to do a session alone. It can be very difficult and demanding to run a session (particularly for a large group) with just you on your own. If you are in a group of 3 and one leader can't make it, then you've still got two people to do the session.

If you have found out that it's only you out of your normal group leaders who can do the next session, why not ask the other leaders if any of them can cover your session with you? The forum on Learn, or email/text etc, is a quick way of finding out if others are free at the time of your session. I've found that other leaders are often quite helpful and accommodating when it comes to covering other sessions - and besides, it's always interesting to see how other PAL leaders do their sessions!

- **Students have asked to go over a specific item / question in the next session - should we include it in the session?**

Yes, definitely! The aim of the sessions is to assist students with parts of their maths courses that they are finding difficult. Often leaders will have to guess as to where the students are, and what they might be struggling with, but if a student tells you they're having a problem with Question 12a) of Problem Sheet 5 then include it in your session!

By paying particular attention to that question during PAL, you'll be guaranteed to be doing something useful and relevant in your session. And if one student is having difficulties with a topic, then it can often be the case that others in the group are in a similar position - so it might be worth paying attention to that, too.

Administration & Logistics of PAL

- **Do I need to print all the resources, papers etc that I want for my session?**

If you have 20 students in your session and you want to print off past papers with solutions for each, that's an awful lot of printing to do with your own print credits! If you ask nicely, there might be a member of staff coordinating PAL who would be able to do some printing & copying for you, for free. The receptionists in the MLSC may also be willing to help you out, if you explain that it's for a PAL session.

- **Who do I talk to if I need to open the room for my session?**

It can be the case - particularly for 9am PAL sessions - that the room you're meant to be using is locked before your session. If you're doing a session in either Schofield or Sir David Davies Buildings then the receptionist on duty in the MLSC there should be able to open it up for you. If you're in the Schofield Building, then try A043 as well if there's not a receptionist on duty.

- **Can I book a different (larger / different location / with different facilities) room for one of the PAL sessions?**

Rooms around campus are often in demand, but it's possible that you could book a different room if you wanted to. Ask the staff members who coordinate PAL, or A043 is a good bet again - students themselves can't book rooms for PAL sessions, but there's usually somebody friendly around who could help by booking it on your behalf.

Week 11 FAQs

- **Should we run any PAL sessions during the revision period?**

Your obligation to run PAL sessions finishes during the Week 11 PAL session - as lectures themselves are finished by then. By the end of Week 11 you'll be starting your own revision week, and then study leave/exams will kick in. You shouldn't be failing your own exams to lay on extra PAL sessions for your students, so that they can pass theirs! So you don't have to do any more than the first eleven (or ten if you start in Week 2) sessions.

Of course, you can ask your students if they would like another PAL session during revision week & study leave. They may not want or need an extra one anyway! But if they are keen, and it doesn't clash with your or their exam timetables, then feel free to put another one on. You'll need to speak to somebody about booking a room, though - see above.

- **Should we provide students with further past papers and answers (if applicable)?**

The simple answer is "ask the lecturer." There could well be a good reason why a lecturer has not made certain resources available to students on the Learn page, for example. It's not the place of a PAL leader to go about providing resources to students against the wishes of a lecturer, so ask first before giving out additional past papers and solutions, if you have them. You lose nothing by asking, anyway.

General FAQs

- **If I'm leading PAL sessions in both semesters, do I need to stay with the same PAL leaders in both semesters?**

No, not necessarily. You can swap to a different group of leaders if you want, and sometimes you have to do this anyway, based on the leaders' timetables.

It has happened quite a lot in the past, though, that when it came to Complex Variables sessions, leaders have chosen to stay with the same people they led for Vector Spaces with. This is usually because you get to be good friends with your fellow PAL leaders, and if you work well together it's natural to carry on the partnership in the second semester.

- **I want to drop out of PAL, halfway through the year. Can I?**

You can drop out of PAL halfway through the year if you want to, although not that many people have in the past. Most leaders really enjoy PAL leading! But if there's any reason that you don't want to continue, you are not expected to carry on PAL leading if you don't want to. Speak to the staff members who coordinate PAL first, though.

- **Students seem confused about a specific topic in their lecture notes for the module, or would like another resource made available to them. What can I do?**

One important aspect of being a PAL leader is that the students in your group should feel able to come to you with any of their questions or concerns about the module. You can encourage this during your sessions too.

If students come to you and say that they didn't understand a certain topic in lectures this week, or that they'd be interested in revising from an older past paper, then you can pass these messages on to the module lecturers. Hopefully lecturers can recap the problematic material next lecture, or have a think about providing further resources. If they don't do so, at least you've tried on the students' behalf!

Often lecturers are quite accommodating in such matters - they're friendly and supportive of the scheme, otherwise PAL couldn't run in the modules! You can act as an intermediary between the lecturer and the students, which is handy if students feel afraid of asking for something or are generally unwilling to approach lecturers with such queries.

N.B. If you do approach lecturers in this manner, to pass on feedback or report on comments from students, never refer to individual students by name! It might be obvious, but you should keep the names of people who have raised queries with you confidential. Something like "some of the students in my PAL session have said they didn't understand ____" or "a few of my PAL students were wondering about whether you could make ____ available?" should do the trick.