

# The Many Advantages of Peer Learning

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The process of learning is not limited to the teacher and the student; rather, it is a social experience in which students learn by interacting with and observing one another. When students work together on a topic, discuss it, ask questions around it, and try to solve the problem by thinking through it collectively, their understanding deepens. They are able to absorb new concepts more effectively.

Some teachers consider a quiet classroom to be synonymous with an ideal and disciplined classroom, where students do not speak to one another, but do their work silently. Whereas Vygotsky's<sup>1</sup> theory of cognitive development expounds that learning is a social process in which conversation, collaboration, and guidance play a key role. Peer learning provides ample opportunities for conversation and collaboration.

Peer learning not only makes the learning process interesting but also enhances students' critical thinking, analytical abilities, and self-reliance in learning. The *National Education Policy 2020* considers it integral to the modern education system and recommends that learning

processes be made discovery-based, group-based, and experiential, so that students are not only confined to textbooks, but also connect with the real world and acquire practical knowledge.

In this article, through a few examples, we shall attempt to understand how peer learning supports the intellectual development of students and the positive conditions it creates during their learning process.

## Counting beads

I gave some beads to students of classes I, II and III and asked them to count them one by one. First, Shubham counted and said that there were 8 (he had counted one



Figure 1: Peer learning enhances students' critical thinking, analytical abilities, and self-reliance in learning.

bead twice) beads. Sneha was very young, but she also wanted to count, and she was given the opportunity. She repeatedly touched all the beads with her finger and said 3. Gaurav counted and said that there were 9 beads in all. After this, Anjana counted and said that there were 6. She had arranged the beads randomly while counting. Then Jeevika separated the beads one by one while counting and said that there were 7 beads. Jeevika had counted each bead and had arrived at the correct answer.

I then asked them how everyone was getting a different answer. The students just smiled. I said, 'Let us count once again.' I said it exactly as I had said before the earlier exercise. However, the students made some changes to their counting method. Shubham began to count by picking up the beads one by one. When he had counted five beads and found it difficult to hold them in his hand, he kept those beads aside and counted the remaining ones. This time, his count was 7. Sneha also began to pick up the beads and hold them in her hand while counting, and she said that there were 7 beads. Anjana followed her earlier method and said that there were 12 beads.

Although only two students (besides Jivika) arrived at the correct answer the second time. Among them, Sneha had said 7 only after hearing it, but she made changes in her counting method and tried to separate the beads that had already been counted. Similarly, Shubham, after observing Jeevika, kept aside the beads that had already been counted and arrived at the correct answer.

This example showed that as students observed one another count, they kept refining their methods. Without direct teacher intervention, they were identifying their mistakes and adopting the correct method. In this example, we saw that a distinctive feature of peer learning is that students develop a tendency to think, analyse, and improve rather than merely imitate. The child psychologist, Jean Piaget, in his theory of cognitive development, stated that students learn more effectively in groups because they correct their mistakes through dialogue with one another. This understanding also establishes the importance of peer learning on scientific grounds.

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## Understanding rolling and sliding objects

In another observation, two students of class II were working on a table given in their workbook. They had to decide which objects roll, which ones slide, and which do both. Their conversation was as follows:

Zoya: A glass slides.

Surja: No, according to me, we should tick both (slides and rolls).

Zoya: How can it be both?

Surja: (Picking up a water bottle kept nearby) Look, when it is kept upright, it slides, but when it falls down, it begins to roll. (Here, Surja used a bottle instead of a glass to explain her point, and Zoya did not raise any objection.)

Zoya: (Happily) Yes, that is right!

This dialogue shows that through peer learning, students were not only resolving their doubts but were also expanding each other's thinking. The role of the teacher here was merely that of an observer, while the actual learning was taking place among the students themselves.

## Learning together

Jayshree of class IV had difficulty reading Hindi. She was a quiet and reserved girl. When her teacher began pairing students to read together, within a few days, Jayshree's reading ability began to improve. She also started participating more actively in classroom discussions. When Jayshree was asked how she learnt reading so quickly with Rounak, she said, 'I do not feel afraid of reading incorrectly in front of Rounak. I can ask Rounak whatever comes to my mind.' It is often observed that students feel hesitant while speaking with an adult. When students learn from their peers, they become self-reliant. They learn to express their thoughts clearly and understand the ideas of others. This increases their self-confidence.

## School trip

Students of class V were given the task of planning a school trip. When the students began their discussion, they first talked about deciding on the mode of transport for the journey. Ayaan said, 'Five people can sit in an auto, so six autos will be required for the entire class.'

Rashmi immediately said, 'It is not only our class that will go! All 120 students up to class VIII are going on the trip. For so many students, it will become a train of autos.'

Vikram said laughingly, 'In that case, let us call a train.'



Figure 2: Students engaged in creating collaborative art.

Ayaan interrupted and said, 'The train does not come to the school.'

Vishal said, 'Then let us arrange a bus.'

Everyone liked the idea of a bus. They calculated that if 45-50 students could sit in one bus, then three buses would need to be arranged.

In this entire task, the students were reasoning on the basis of their experience and understanding and were able to think of and express their own methods of problem solving. Every student thinks differently and solves problems differently. When students learn from one another, they understand various perspectives that enrich their knowledge.

### Adding by counting

Students of class II were solving addition problems. Vinay had solved all the sums. He noticed that Dilip was still working. Dilip first drew as many lines as the two numbers

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in the addition problems and then counted all the lines. Seeing this, Vinay explained to him, 'Why do you need to count again and again? Look at this (pointing to the lines drawn for one number by Dilip), you already know how many lines there are, so just count ahead from there.' Dilip expressed surprise and said, 'Oh yes, I had not thought of that!'

When one student identifies another's mistake or provides new information, they develop their reasoning and thinking ability. The other students also learn the method suggested by their peers, compare it with their own method, and make changes accordingly. In this way, the learning process helps them to develop a critical and analytical perspective.

### Writing stories

Students of class III were given some pictures and asked to write a story.

Navya: 'I do not know how to write a story.'

Sakshi: 'I can write, but what should I write about?'

Navya: 'There is a man and some monkeys in the picture. Create a story about them.'

Gaurav: 'Yes, perhaps this man is scolding the monkeys?'

Navya: 'This man must be the owner of this garden. Let us begin like this—There was a man who had a big garden...'

Gaurav: 'One day a monkey came and said to the owner, "May I stay here?"'

The three students started taking the story forward by making their own assumptions and thinking about it after looking at the given pictures. Each one of them had their own abilities. This helped the group to write a better story. When students engage in dialogue with one another, express their views, and understand the views of others, they realise that with mutual support, even difficult tasks can become easy. This skill is useful for them throughout their lives.

If peer learning is understood only as 'forming a group of bright and weak students, where the bright students teach, and the weak students learn', then it would be a narrow understanding of peer learning. Instead, when teachers adopt peer learning as an essential and natural teaching method that enhances students' learning, not only does it enrich students' learning, but the teacher's work also becomes more manageable. In such a situation, teachers are able to reach a greater number of students individually.

### Some suggestions for the effective use of the peer learning method

- While forming groups, it is important to consider the students' age, interests, and abilities so that participation of all members in group work can be ensured.
- Teachers should explain the task assigned to the group and the role of the students in it in simple and clear words. This will guarantee that the task is clear and ensure the active participation of all students.
- If some students are not participating in group work, identify the reasons for this and try to include them by finding appropriate solutions.

### References

<sup>1</sup> Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky was a Russian and Soviet psychologist. He is known for his work on psychological development in children and for creating the framework known as cultural-historical activity theory.

Translated from Hindi. Translator: Shabnam Sengupta Vetter: Simran Luthra



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- While students are engaged in group work and discussion, the teacher should play the role of a facilitator in guiding them in the right direction, whenever required.
- In peer learning, instead of following the same strategy each time, make changes based on the situation.
- The level of simplicity or complexity in activities can be decided according to the age and understanding level of the students.
- Appreciate students' teamwork, spirit of cooperation, and efforts. This creates a positive learning environment.
- Change students' roles from time to time so that everyone gets an opportunity to lead and to learn.

### Conclusion

Peer learning is not merely a teaching strategy; it is an extension of students' natural way of learning. When students engage in discussion with one another, they not only expand their knowledge, but also develop social qualities such as 'cooperation, patience, and tolerance'. The *National Education Policy 2020* also emphasises this, stating that the learning process should be made more interactive and practical, particularly in the classroom. Teachers and parents should make efforts to encourage students to explore, experiment, and learn from one another. In this way, learning can become not only interesting but also more effective and memorable.