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M. Tanya Bran-Barrett  
*University College of Cape Breton*

Judith A. Rolls  
*University College of Cape Breton*

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Communication Lab Peer Facilitators: What’s In It for Them?

M. Tanya Brann-Barrett
Judith A. Rolls

The notion of students tutoring students has had a long history within both formal and in informal learning environments. With roots dating back to before the first century, evidence suggests that even Aristotle used peer leaders to assist with his teaching (Wagner, 1982). A review of contemporary literature indicates that peer tutoring, or peer facilitation as it is sometimes referred, has been implemented, developed, and researched in K through 12 (Boland-Willms, 1991; Fischer, 1999-2000; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Karns, 2001; Gaustad, 1993; Mathes, Howard, Allen, & Fuchs, 1998; Myrick & Bowman; 1991; Olmscheid, 1999) as well as in higher education (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000; Martin & Arendale, 1992; Saunders, 1992; Smith, 2000; Sniad; 2000). The structure and goals of peer facilitation programs vary from institution to institution. Some are informal and uncomplicated, and simply link students who perform well academically with those who do not. Others require peers to provide each other with feedback on academic work. In more structured models, tutors are trained specifically for the role.

Peer tutors have also been used extensively within the communication discipline to enhance students’ learning experiences (Hill, 1981; Webb & Lane, 1986). In fact, peer facilitators have played an integral role in
the development, execution, and growth of communication laboratories as a pedagogical learning model (Alley-Young, 2000; Brann-Barrett & Sulliman, 2002; Grice & Cronin, 1992; Hobgood, 2000; Morreale, 1994; Rolls, 1998; Sulliman & Brann-Barrett, 1999.) The overarching goal of communication labs is to provide a context where students can learn experientially. This comes in the form of one-on-one interactions, or small group sessions where the peer facilitator works with students to help them enhance their understanding of communication. Sometimes communication labs consist of large groups of students that come together specifically to engage in experiential learning exercises. Regardless of how communication labs are set up, they typically feature peer facilitators, peer assistants, or peer consultants (depending on the individual characteristics or goal of the lab) to help fellow students.

Attendance at communication labs can help students attain a variety of communication skills. Research has demonstrated that students respond well to experiential learning labs and learn to integrate concepts at the cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels (Rolls, 1993). Clements (1995) notes that students who are exposed to experiential learning rate the value of and their interest in the subject matter higher than do lecture students and, they find experiential learning instructors more courteous and considerate than traditional lecturers. Further, both females and males learn equally well in communication labs (Rolls, 1997).

Not only do students, or tutees, respond well to the experiential learning that occurs in communication labs, there is research to suggest that tutors or peer facilitators also gain from the experience (Gaustad, 1993; Gen-
Peer Facilitation Benefits

In fact, Topping (1996) notes the potential for mutual benefits to be derived for both the tutee and the tutor when he defines peer tutoring as “people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching” (p. 322). However, there is little to no research that examines the benefits that peer facilitators who run small group communication labs actually receive. Given the recent proliferation of interest in (Burnette, 1998; Ellis, Shockley-Zalabak & Hackman, 2000; Morreale, 2001; Ratliffe & Hudson, 1987) and numbers of peer facilitators who participate in such centers, a study examining the benefits of tutoring for peer facilitators would be useful and relevant for communication pedagogy. From a more practical perspective, information garnered by the study could prove valuable to communication departments wishing to develop labs. If it can be demonstrated that such models are mutually beneficial to students and facilitators, institutions may be more willing to invest finances and human resources in this endeavor. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the perceived benefits that peer facilitators receive as a result of facilitating communication labs that consist of small experiential learning groups. Specifically, the research question was: What benefits do peer facilitators derive from the peer facilitation process?
METHOD

This study was intended as a preliminary exploration of the benefits derived from peer facilitation. For this reason, focus groups were used to collect descriptive data. According to Lederman (1990), focus group interviews allow for the generation of rich data. She endorses focus groups as a data collection tool for assessing educational effectiveness in that if you want to know how students are doing, ask them. Further, the dynamic created among group participants is often greater than the sum of the individuals.

Participants

Participants consisted of ten former peer facilitators who had worked in an undergraduate communication lab between September, 1998 and April, 2002. Peer facilitators were male and female upper level students who maintained a 70 average (equivalent to a 3.0 grade point average). The number of semesters each participant worked in the lab varied from one to six, thus representing both repeat and one-time-only peer facilitators. At the time the focus groups were conducted, the facilitators had graduated within the past two years.

Because focus groups are not selected by random sampling (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001, p. 19), fifteen former peer facilitators were invited to participate in the study. While all were willing, five could not attend due to scheduling conflicts. The peer facilitators in this study satisfy what Krueger (1998) refers to as “purposeful” sampling, whereby the researcher selects
participants based on the purpose of the study” (p. 71). The goal of the focus groups was to learn about the benefits of peer facilitating. Clearly, only those having had the experience could engage in such a discussion. This control of the group composition is referred to as segmentation (Morgan, 1997) and is related to homogeneity. For best results, focus group samplings should be homogeneous in focus experience but not in attitudes (Morgan, 1997). As Lederman (1990) notes, “It is the “group-of-like-kind” context which creates the freedom to discuss thoughts, feelings, and behaviors candidly” (p. 118) and, it is this interaction among participants that makes the data unique (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 58).

The lab sessions conducted by peer facilitators are a mandatory component of the two basic communication courses (Introduction to Interpersonal Communication and Introduction to Public Communication) that are delivered at the university. Students meet in regularly scheduled, small groups of five to seven participants and engage in experiential learning activities, practice for upcoming graded classroom performances, and complete subjective reflective journals of their lab experiences. Along with facilitating weekly lab sessions, peer facilitators provide extensive written and verbal assessments of their students’ participation, assess their students’ subjective reflective journals, and maintain their students’ files and records (Brann-Barrett, 2001). Facilitators also maintain detailed logs of each session they facilitate and these are reviewed regularly by the lab coordinator. Peer facilitators receive on-going training through attendance at weekly meetings. Each of these components helps to maintain a well-developed, fine-tuned peer facilitation program.
Focus Group Format

Two focus groups, each consisting of five peer facilitators and lasting approximately two hours, were held in the Communication Lab. The size of the groups is in keeping with social science research where the goal is to generate depth of information. Larger groups can inhibit discussion and self-disclosure, and be difficult to moderate (Bloor et al., 2001). Participants were provided total disclosure about the purpose of the study and each read and signed a consent form prior to participation. Sessions were audio taped to ensure accuracy in recording comments. As is also recommended (Krueger, 1994, 1998; Kirby & McKenna, 1989), verbal and written field notes were made both during and after each session. These included first impressions, notes pertaining to the kinds of responses that emerged, and observation of communication climate and nonverbal cues. Krueger (1998) advises that focus groups be conducted until a level of theoretical saturation has been reached; that is, until emergent themes became redundant. Kirby and McKenna (1989) refer to this phenomenon as “saturation of information” (p. 123). The researchers were satisfied that this had occurred.

Questions. The focus groups were conducted by one of the researchers and a moderately scheduled question format served as a guide (See Appendix A). Lederman (1990) states that questions used in focus groups should enable the researcher to answer the research question. Given that this was a preliminary inquiry into perceived benefits of facilitating, questions that could provide such information were developed. Although the questions were not pilot tested per se, potential study participants...
were asked to review the guide for clarity and to suggest any questions that might be useful.

Questions focused on how the peer facilitators’ experience affected participants’ role as students, understanding of communication theory, application process for further education, impact on career choice, professional life, and personal life. Facilitators were also given an opportunity to engage in informal group discussions pertinent to the subject matter.

**Analysis**

Focus group data can be analyzed in a variety of ways (Bloor et al., 2001; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Krueger, 1994, 1998b; Lederman, 1990; Morgan, 1997). The system used for this study was adapted from those described by Nelson (1989), Krueger (1994; 1998), and Bloor et al. (2001). It consisted of three phases: transcription, organization (coding), and interpretation. First, a transcription-based copy (Krueger, 1994; 1998) of the focus groups was made. The data were transcribed verbatim and nonverbal vocal cues were recorded as well. This script served as the basis for the organization and interpretation stages of analysis.

In the organization phase, the data are *coded* (Morgan, 1997) or *indexed* (Bloor et al, 2001). Aubel (1994) writes that: “Qualitative data are not neatly compartmentalized as are quantitative data. Data collectors are sometimes overwhelmed with the absence of order in the mass of data which they have collected. The coding process aims to organize the data in relation to the specific objectives of the study” (p.46). Bloor et al. (2001) note that index codes are broad at the onset and
become more focused as the analysis continues. In this study, responses were first computer color-coded according to the three overarching and interwoven benefits that were probed during the focus group discussions: academic, professional, and personal benefits. These topics were emphasized by participants in both groups and suggest what Morgan (1997) refers to as ‘group-to-group validation’ (p. 63). He writes that, “…whenever a topic comes up, it generates a consistent level of energy among a consistent proportion of the participants across nearly all the groups” (p.63).

After the initial color-coding into these broad topics, the data were copied and pasted into corresponding organized response files. Each file was then re-organized and further refined into emergent sub-categories of the perceived benefits, which were also color-coded and number labeled. Once these steps were completed, the original transcript was reviewed to ensure that descriptors and comments were considered within the context they were delivered. Further, fieldnotes were also reviewed as they contained nonverbal observations and comments regarding the communication climate among the participants. When the emergent sub-categories were examined, it became evident that the benefits of engaging in the peer facilitator process might be grouped in terms of self-development, skill acquisition, and external rewards. These are further explained in the results section.

**Validity**

Steps were taken at each phase of the research process to ensure that the results would be a valid reflection...
of participants’ responses (Krueger, 1998). For instance, before the focus groups were conducted, potential participants reviewed the questions. During the actual group discussions, the moderator summarized participants’ responses, provided “internal summaries,” (Lederman, 1990), sought clarification when necessary, and provided ample opportunity for addition comments, particularly at the end of the sessions. During the analysis, attention was also given to the context of the content and the accompanying nonverbal cues. These steps were deemed important in the analysis because they helped to create an accurate summary of the focus group conversations.

**RESULTS**

In the final analysis of the data where themes are reduced and combined to further understand and interpret student comments, it became evident that engaging in the peer facilitation process resulted in three major outcomes: self-development, skill acquisition, and external rewards. These results are explained and illustrated in this section.

**Self-Development**

The emergence of the sub-themes suggests that peer facilitators developed and matured as a result of the experience. For instance, they reported feeling a new sense of belonging, an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence, more respect for themselves and others, and an increased desire to succeed.
**Peer Facilitation Benefits**

*Sense of belonging.* Prior to becoming lab facilitators, many felt a sense of detachment. However, as a result of the experience, they stated that they felt a stronger connection with the university, as is demonstrated in the following comment.

Being a facilitator has allowed me to have that sense of community and to feel like I was part of the university. I was a student 3 years before I became a facilitator. I was always a good student but I felt a kind of distance from the university. I didn’t really know what was going on and I wanted to find out what the university was all about because I was detached somewhat. Facilitation provided that sense of community.

Many facilitators also said they saw themselves as representatives of the university and the Communication Department. For instance, comments such as, “It definitely gave me a greater perspective on the university and more appreciation for it. I feel I became a representative for the institution,” or “As facilitators, you are representatives of the department and of the university and you should try to be a good representative” exemplify this response. So too does the following statement:

I always felt like a little bit of a recruiter. I’d hear myself saying to lab students, “And if you want to learn more about this, take this or that communication class!” Because I had the knowledge I could talk about topics they brought up and I could answer the questions they had and then suggest they take an upper level course.
Increased self-esteem and self-confidence. As the peer facilitators experienced positive changes in their self-esteem, their self confidence increased. The two benefits were clearly interrelated. All the participants echoed the following comment.

The self-esteem and the confidence alone are amazing! I have learned just how much I can do! People say to me, “You always look so confident.” When people tell you, “You look so confident, and you seem to really know what you are doing,” you begin to say “Wow! I can really do this.”

Increased respect for self and others. Facilitators reported that they gained more respect for themselves and also for others.

As a peer facilitator, you learn how to respect yourself and if you already respect yourself, you learn how to show that you respect yourself. Your relationship with yourself grows too. You develop your self-concept and learn how to love yourself. You figure yourself out and how you communicate and how you show the world who you are.

Facilitators also said they felt less intimidated by people in positions of authority, because as they pointed out, as peer facilitators, they held positions of authority and quickly learned that arrogance and domination are not synonymous with authority. In the lab, they encouraged relationships with students based on mutual respect. As one participant remarked: “We’ve learned about positions of authority. We know you can have a position of authority and not be authoritative.”

Peer facilitators stated that along with the development of a better sense of self, they became more sensi-
peer facilitators became more open-minded and approachable. In particular, they noted that the facilitation experiences made them more empathetic toward professors. They became aware of the degree of preparation that professors must engage in, the amount of time they spend grading and evaluating, and the anxieties they must sometimes feel in the classroom. They also said it was important to realize that most of their professors do care about their students. “A lot of students think, ‘What does the professor care...I’m the one paying for this.’ But after facilitating I know they do care. It bothers me if a lab student doesn’t do well.” The peer facilitators also expressed that it bothered them when their professors were not treated respectfully.

I used to think it wasn’t a big deal for a professor to get in front of a class and teach, but after being in the lab situation, having facilitated myself, it allows me to look at professors in a whole new way. They might get nervous before they go to class and I had never thought about that. In one of the bigger classes I was in, the students always talked during lectures and did not show the professor any respect and that really bothered me because I knew how it felt. I used to think they got up there, they weren’t nervous, and it didn’t bother them if you didn’t want to listen but now I know it does and it is distracting to them when they are trying to get across this information and people aren’t helping them.

Increased Desire to Succeed. Peer facilitators reported that they became more motivated, disciplined,
perseverant, and focused as a result of their experience. They developed critical thinking and reflection abilities. They came to appreciate the importance of preparation, creativity, and hard work in the learning process. They also expressed this as an increased desire to succeed academically. They recognized they had to earn credibility with the lab students and the communication department faculty. Hence, facilitators felt compelled to excel.

For my first three years, I was basically a student who just wanted to have fun. I didn’t want to go to all my classes. I didn’t really care. I find that since I’ve become a facilitator, I have become more mature. I mean, if I have one of my lab students in one of my other classes, I can’t say, “I’m not going to that class today” because how will that look? How am I going to get the respect of the students in my lab if I only go to other classes once in a while? I found that being a facilitator made me a better student and I became very mature very quickly. I wanted the respect of my students.

In addition to the desire to succeed, participants felt they had acquired a better understanding of communication theory. They attributed this to the time spent reviewing communication theories in preparation for lab sessions, explaining those theories to their students, and engaging in discussion about the theories during their lab sessions. They also spent a substantial amount of time talking about communication theory when they attended their peer facilitators’ meetings and during informal dialogue with fellow facilitators.

When I took upper level interpersonal I was facilitating introductory interpersonal communication labs at
Peer Facilitation Benefits

the same time so it was like I was getting extra help. And I could give the lab students a little more.... When I was doing 3 or 4 labs a week I was spending an extra 3 or 4 hours a week on interpersonal concepts. I was refreshing my own knowledge of the theories in lab, bringing it to class, then bringing what I did in class back to lab.

Peer facilitators also felt they continued to learn about the theory as they observed and listened to their lab students.

It placed the communication theory in a new perspective. In my mind, it made me see things differently. I think taking the basic courses gave me a basic understanding. But before I facilitated every lab I would review the information; I already knew it but I would refresh my understanding. And when I would watch the lab students doing the activities I would actually see how it all fits together. It’s great when you do it yourself as a lab student but then to see your students doing it…it just all fit together. It’s another level of understanding.

The overall self-development experienced by the facilitators made them feel better about themselves and others, and enhanced their commitment to the institution and to their educational success. These results are consistent with the literature in that a positive correlation has been demonstrated between self-esteem and academic success at the elementary level of education (King, Vidourek, Davis, & McLellan, 2000; Kugle & Clements, 1981, McInerney & Marsh, 2000) as well as at the postsecondary level (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Foster, 1998; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Further, it has been shown that extracurricular involvement also has a
positive influence on academic commitment (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Finn, 1989; March & Kleitman, 2002) and so too is retention associated with self-esteem and academic success (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Given the association between self-esteem, self-confidence, and involvement with academic success and retention, it would appear that the self-development experienced by peer facilitators could positively influence their overall success at university.

**Skill Acquisition**

In addition to an overall self-improvement, peer facilitators reported an improvement in their communication skills. Specifically, they noted improvements in their public speaking abilities, their interpersonal relationships, and in some miscellaneous areas that included time management, critical thinking, and conflict management. The essence of their discussion on these matters is explained next.

*Improved public speaking skills.* Peer facilitators were very much aware of their improved public speaking skills. The time they spent facilitating their lab groups provided ample opportunity for improvement. However, they attributed their enhanced speaking abilities to a decrease in their own communication apprehension levels. Further, a greater awareness of their communication styles and the strides they made to improve their weaknesses also proved beneficial both personally and professionally. This is illustrated in the following remarks.

> When I got to the advanced level of public speaking, the fact that I had facilitated made me feel so much...
more comfortable and confident and I was a much bet-
ner presenter.

I perform as a musician and I used to get up and just
mumble and then play a song and then mumble
again. I felt after facilitating there was some sort of a
confidence that built up in me. Learning how to com-
municate with people and knowing that in order for
people to get it, and for them to understand why you
are standing up there, you have to be able to tell
them. It helped me in that way. I don't mumble into
the microphone anymore. My mother watched me per-
form and she said, “I can tell you are a communication
student!”

Their improved public speaking skills were also evi-
dent in other courses. The comments below demonstrate
this.

I was always doing group work and making presenta-
tions in my business classes. In the beginning, I was
shy and nervous. But now I feel so much better when
I give presentations and I do a better job. I know it
was facilitating in the lab that helped me improve.

When I think of all the classes I took this year, I can
honestly say that I do not think I would have done as
well in those classes had I not been facilitating and its
simply because many of my classes were very interac-
tive and we were expected to get up and talk about a
certain aspect of what we were covering and I don't
think I would have been able to do that as well had I
not been a facilitator. In one of the classes there was a
lot of small group work and being able to talk in a
group and being able to lead a group and keep the dis-
cussion focused on the topic at hand I think I defi-
nitely learned that from being a facilitator. So I know
Peer Facilitation Benefits

for a fact I would not have done as well in my other classes.

*Improved interpersonal skills.* Peer facilitators also reported the development of their interpersonal communication skills. In particular, they said that they had better interpersonal communication with families and friends, with the peer facilitators, and with individuals in authority positions. This is discussed below.

Peer facilitation had a positive impact on the personal relationships of the participants. This created a ripple effect that benefited their families and friends.

It [peer facilitating] does a lot for you personally. It has benefited my relationships, not just the friendships I’ve made here, but at the family level- whether it be with my fiancé, my mother, or my daughter. So, it’s not just me personally who has benefited. I think the impact on my family is positive as a result.

Interactions with friends change. You’re able to listen and you’re able to be more sympathetic and you’re able to get people out of tough times. There are a lot of times in your life when you need to call upon your communication skills to help somebody or to help yourself... or ask for help. People will come up to me and unload all kinds of stuff because they know I won’t judge. You learn how to just listen, which is an extremely important skill.

I don’t know if my relationship with my boyfriend over the past four years would have been as strong as it is if I hadn’t learned so much about relationships through this experience, like how to talk about things, how to go about things as a communicator.
Along with improvements in existing relationships, peer facilitators spoke highly of the friendships they developed with fellow facilitators. Many felt these relationships were unique because they were grounded in positive interpersonal communication principles.

Everyone [peer facilitators] is so supportive. There is no begrudging each other. When something good happens to one of us we feel, “Good for you, you deserve it.” We had these qualities coming in but they become reinforced by each other and our professors.

The group of peer facilitators covered an age span of forty years. Some were married, some were single or widowed, some had children and some had grandchildren. They were male and female and came from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and different sexual orientations. These differences appear to have enriched the friendships among peer facilitators and did not seem to deter any peer facilitator from reaching out to another. The common link among the peer facilitators was their passion for the communication discipline. They worked to embody the communication ideals they were learning and sharing with their lab students.

We are so excited that we found each other. We all have this same sort of knowledge and passion and it just clicks! Something happens in the first facilitator workshop of the year when we are all there together.

These are relationships that develop because we are all facilitators and there is mutual respect. We all have a sense of pride about what we are doing. These are mature relationships, long-term friendships that come from the mutual respect and pride we all have.
Relationships with people of authority. Increased confidence and the acquisition of new interpersonal skills had far reaching benefits that proved significant in the lives of these facilitators. One benefit came from the peer facilitators’ increased confidence when communicating with people in positions of authority. Specifically, a number of the participants indicated they now had more effective relationships with their physicians. The comment below was followed by a chorus of similar testaments.

I’m better able to communicate with my own doctor...I was faced with a medical concern over the past year and, if I didn’t have this communication experience, I wouldn’t have had the courage to say to my doctor: “You have to hurry up and help me!” For me to sit down with my doctor a couple of years ago and insist he do something for me...I couldn’t do that. Now I can say, “If you are suggesting this treatment, what is it going to do to me, how will it affect my body?” Before I would go to the doctor, he’d give me a prescription for something, and I wouldn’t question anything. I have learned how to ask the questions and be forceful. I know how to probe. I know how to delve deeper. I know that’s an incredible personal benefit.

Peer facilitators also indicated they were more confident when interacting with professors. Asking a professor for extra help or grade clarification, for example, can be a daunting experience for a student. Peer facilitators recognized they have the confidence to do that.

I think we are very fortunate to have confidence and we sometimes take it for granted. When students come to me with a problem I will suggest they talk to
their professor and they say, “I can’t talk to my professor!”

**Miscellaneous skill development.** At the end of the focus group sessions, peer facilitators were invited to list the skills they had developed as a result of their facilitation experience. In addition to those described in this section, they noted time management skills, problem solving skills, and conflict management skills. They also said they learned to be more adaptable and flexible in new situations and they thought they had developed their critical thinking and reflection abilities.

In all, it makes sense that students would improve their public speaking and interpersonal skills because these topics are the focus of the two basic courses that the communication labs accompany. Peer facilitators would have learned and practiced such skills on a continual basis throughout the semester. In some instances, facilitators conducted up to four labs per week per term over a two-year period. Their enhanced skills are in keeping with Cress’s (2001) research. She found that students who participated in educational and training programs showed a growth in their understanding of leadership skills, multicultural and cultural awareness, and personal and societal values.

**External Rewards**

The final major outcome of the perceived benefits received by engaging in the peer facilitation process can be classified as external rewards. Facilitators expressed that they felt better prepared for graduate studies and to compete in the job market. These are described below.
Success in further educational endeavors. The peer facilitators clearly indicated that they felt better prepared for post baccalaureate education.

I plan to go on and get my Masters and I think my facilitation experience will allow me to be a competitive candidate. Not everybody gets to facilitate.

I think the reason I was accepted into a Bachelor of Education program was because of my facilitation experience.

They told me it [facilitation experience] was the reason I was accepted into a B.Ed program.

Increased employment opportunities. Facilitators stated that the skills they acquired as peer facilitators proved useful when it came time to seek other forms of employment. In many instances, they said it was the facilitation experience that allowed them to secure jobs.

Recently I went for a job interview and they saw peer facilitation on my resume and asked me about it. I began to tell them what I did and they were fascinated with it. They couldn’t believe it! It was definitely a selling point. I know it helped me get that job. When they see that your university trusted you enough to do this and thought enough of you to allow you to be a facilitator, it speaks a lot for you as a mature, responsible individual. It definitely helped me get that job.

I went to see someone last week to help me prepare a cover letter for my resume and as soon as he saw that I was a peer facilitator he said, “This definitely has to be in there! Put this in bold letters right in the cover letter!”

It was suggested that benefits not only came from the actual facilitating, but also from the networks facili-
Facilitators explained that they felt their professors, in particular their communication professors, were eager to recommend them for jobs and to offer positive letters of reference for admittance into advanced academic programs. Facilitators were also invited to participate in volunteer and paid communication training workshops, both on campus and in the greater community. This further enhanced their credibility and offered them more extensive experience and professional development.

Success in further educational endeavors could be connected to peer facilitators’ commitment to academic success and to their skill development – both of which make them better candidates for a variety of educational pursuits. In terms of increased employment opportunities, the importance of having public speaking, interpersonal, and leadership abilities in the workplace has been documented (Ellis & Taylor, 1983; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Krzystofik & Fein, 1998; Messmer, 1999; and Parvis, 2001).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The perceived significance of the peer facilitation experience for the participants in this study is evident.
Similarly, many of the derived benefits identified in this study are also in keeping with other research in the area of peer tutoring. Olmscheid (1999) suggests that peer tutors increase their confidence and develop a sense of responsibility. As well, they improve their own knowledge base. Stauf (1999) noted that peer tutors reap personal rewards from the peer tutoring experience. Gaustad (1993) cited improved thinking and communication skills among peer tutors in a one-on-one setting. It appears that many of these benefits also reflect the experiences of peer facilitators who work with small groups.

What is also apparent is that although these descriptive themes are presented in a linear fashion, the outcomes experienced by the peer facilitators seem to be intertwined and connected. Self-development may lead to the type of skill acquisition described by the participants. And, there could be a link between self-development and skills acquisition and the kinds of external rewards reported by peer facilitators. Further investigation into the possibility of a causal relationship among the outcomes could result in the development of a model that depicts how the outcomes are related.

It should be noted that these peer facilitators worked within a well-developed program. Similar results may not emerge if peer facilitators are not given the necessary training, support, encouragement, and direction. We suggest that it is essential for coordinators of peer facilitator programs to remember that facilitators are students themselves and need the same considerations as the students they facilitate. When a peer facilitation program is soundly developed, consistently critiqued, and strengthened as is deemed necessary, all
vested parties can benefit from a rewarding experiential learning experience.

This study serves as a preliminary research project for other more in-depth academic endeavors. Future research may include a longitudinal study that investigates peer facilitation experiences. Speaking to former peer facilitators 5 to 10 years after the experience may provide valuable insight as to whether or not the benefits of the experience were long-term and, if so, under what circumstances. It would also be interesting to conduct a gender analysis of the perceived benefits of peer facilitation. Finally, given that this is a preliminary study with a relatively small number of participants, a quantitative testing instrument might be developed from these results and administered to other groups of peer facilitators to determine if the results can be generalized.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTION SCHEDULE

Participants will be asked to provide brief introduc-
tions indicating how long they worked as a peer facilita-
tor and when they were employed in the lab

• Tell me what kind of impact your peer facilitation
  experience had on your role as a university stu-
dent.

• What kind of effect, if any, did your work as a peer
  facilitator have on your a) understanding of com-
munication theory and concepts, b) your under-
standing of theories and concepts in other disci-
plines?

• Has your peer facilitation experience proved bene-
  ficial when applying for postgraduate university or
  college programs? If so, give an example.

• Discuss whether or not your role as a peer facilita-
tor had an impact on your career choices.

• Tell me if and how your peer facilitation experi-
ences have affected your professional life.

• Tell me about some of the personal benefits you
  feel you have gained through your work as a peer
  facilitator.