Why Peer Discussion Improves Student Performance on In-Class Concept Questions

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When students answer an in-class conceptual question individually using clickers, discuss it with their neighbors, and then revote on the same question, the percentage of correct answers typically increases. This outcome could result from gains in understanding during discussion, or simply from peer influence of knowledgeable students on their neighbors. To distinguish between these alternatives in an undergraduate genetics course, we followed the above exercise with a second, similar (isomorphic) question on the same concept that students answered individually. Our results indicate that peer discussion enhances understanding, even when none of the students in a discussion group originally knows the correct answer.

In undergraduate science courses, conceptual questions that students answer using personal response systems or “clickers” are promoted as a means to increase student learning [e.g. (1, 2)], often through peer instruction (PI) (3). Instructors using this approach break up their lectures with multiple-choice questions to test understanding of the concepts being presented. When PI is used, students are first asked to answer a question individually, and then a histogram of their responses may be displayed to the class. If there is substantial disagreement among responses, students are invited to discuss questions briefly with their neighbors and then revote before the correct answer is revealed. The instructor then displays the new histogram and explains the reasoning behind the correct answer. Most instructors report that the percentage of correct answers, as well as students’ confidence in their answers, almost always increases after peer discussion (2–4).

It is generally assumed that active engagement of students during discussion with peers, some of whom know the correct answer, leads to increased conceptual understanding, resulting in improved performance after PI. However, there is an alternative explanation: that students do not in fact learn from the discussion, but simply choose the answer most strongly supported by neighbors they perceive to be knowledgeable. We sought to distinguish between these alternatives, using an additional, similar clicker question that students answered individually to test for gains in understanding. Our results indicate that peer discussion enhances understanding, even when none of the students in a discussion group originally knows the correct answer.

In an undergraduate introductory genetics course for biology majors at the University of Colorado–Boulder (additional demographic in-

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References and Notes

2. δ18O or δ17O = Rsample/Rstandard − 1 (where R = 16O/18O or 17O/18O); the same δ notation applies to δ13C or δ34S in this paper.
3. Reference units for stable isotope compositions: VSMOW for δ13C and δ18O; and Vienna Canyon Diablo Trolite for δ34S.
13. Materials and methods are available as supporting material on Science Online.
25. H.B. and J.I.F. designed research and led the writing of the manuscript; H.B. performed CAS extraction and triple oxygen isotope measurements; J.I.F secured samples from field expeditions and conducted sedimentological, petrographic, mineralogical and elemental studies; P.M.W. conducted preliminary CAS extraction and performed δ34S analysis; and C.S. carried out δ13C and δ18O analysis of host carbonates. We thank G. Halverson for discussion and Y. Peng for analytical assistance. Financial and facility supports were provided by Louisiana State University, NSF, and Chinese Academy of Science (H.B.), Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) standard grant (GR/S/511890/1) and NERC indutively coupled plasma mass spectrometry facilities (I.F.), and Austrian Science Funds (C.S.). The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Supporting Online Material

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formation in table S1), we asked an average of five clicker questions per 50-min class throughout the semester and encouraged students to discuss questions with their neighbors. Students were given participation points for answering clicker questions, regardless of whether their answers were correct. Exam questions were similar to the clicker questions, so that students had an incentive to take clicker questions seriously.

Sixteen times during the semester we assessed how much students learned from peer discussion by using a paired set of similar (isomorphic) clicker questions. Isomorphic questions have different “cover stories,” but require application of the same principles or concepts for solution (5, 6). Sample isomorphic question pairs are shown in fig. S1. In class, students were first asked to answer one question of the pair individually (Q1). Then they were invited to discuss the question with their neighbors and revote on the same question (Q1ad for “Q1 after discussion”). Finally, students were asked to answer the second isomorphic question, again individually (Q2). Neither the answers to the two questions (Q1/Q1ad and Q2) nor the histograms of student answers were revealed until after the voting on Q2, so that there was minimal instructor or whole-course peer influence on the Q2 responses. The isomorphic questions were randomly assigned as Q1/Q1ad or Q2 after both questions were written. Data analysis was limited to students who answered all three questions of an isomorphic pair with a total of 350 students participating in the study (7) (see supporting online text).

Two results indicate that most students learned from the discussion of Q1. First, using data pooled from individual mean scores on Q1, Q1ad, and Q2 for all 16 question pairs, the average percentage correct for Q2 was significantly higher than for Q1 and Q1ad (Fig. 1A and Table 1). Second, of the students who answered Q1 incorrectly and Q1ad correctly, 77% answered Q2 correctly (Fig. 2). This result suggests that most students who initially did not understand a concept were able to apply information they learned during the group discussion and correctly answer an isomorphic question. In contrast, almost all students who answered Q1 correctly, presumably because they understood the concept initially, did not change their votes on Q1ad and went on to answer Q2 correctly (Fig. 2).

In addition, students who answered both Q1 and Q1ad incorrectly still appeared to learn from discussions with peers and answering a second question on the same topic. Of these students, 44% answered Q2 correctly, significantly better than expected from random guessing (Fig. 2; on average, the questions in our 16 isomorphic pairs had four answer choices each). This result was unexpected because when students answered Q2, they had not been told the correct answer to Q1 or Q1ad, had not seen histograms of student responses, and had not discussed Q2 with their peers. We speculate that when this group of students discussed Q1, they were making sense of the information, but were unable to apply their new knowledge until presented with a fresh question on the same concept (Q2). There may also be a learning benefit to considering successive clicker questions on the same topic (8).

Although the difficulty of the question pairs varied, as judged by the percentage of correct answers on Q1 (see supporting online text), students performed significantly better on Q1ad and Q2 compared to Q1 for each difficulty level (Fig. 1B and Table 1). On the most difficult questions there was another significant increase between Q1ad and Q2, suggesting that there was an additional delayed benefit to the group discussions.

Table 1. Mean differences between Q1, Q1ad, and Q2. The SEM is in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question category</th>
<th>Q1ad−Q1* (%)</th>
<th>Q2−Q1* (%)</th>
<th>Q2−Q1ad* (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All questions</td>
<td>16(1)</td>
<td>21(1)</td>
<td>5(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy questions</td>
<td>16(1)</td>
<td>12(2)</td>
<td>−4(1)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium questions</td>
<td>15(1)</td>
<td>16(2)</td>
<td>1(1)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult questions</td>
<td>16(2)</td>
<td>38(2)</td>
<td>22(2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mean values are the averages of the differences between Q1ad–Q1, Q2–Q1, and Q2–Q1ad for each student. †No significant improvement between these questions.

Fig. 2. Breakdown of student responses for the pool of 16 Q1, Q1ad, and Q2 questions. Percentages of the category are connected by arrows from the preceding line. Underlined entries represent students who initially did not answer Q1 correctly but did so after group discussion; entries with an asterisk represent students who did not answer either Q1 or Q1ad correctly, but nevertheless were able to correctly answer the isomorphic question Q2. Of the 32 questions in our 16 question pairs, 7 had 5 answer choices, 5 had 4 choices, 3 had 3 choices, and 1 had 2 choices.
Regulation of Neuronal Survival Factor MEF2D by Chaperone-Mediated Autophagy

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Chaperone-mediated autophagy controls the degradation of selective cytosolic proteins and may protect neurons against degeneration. In a neuronal cell line, we found that chaperone-mediated autophagy regulated the activity of myocyte enhancer factor 2D (MEF2D), a transcription factor required for neuronal survival. MEF2D was observed to continuously shuttle to the cytoplasm, interact with the chaperone Hsc70, and undergo degradation. Inhibition of chaperone-mediated autophagy caused accumulation of inactive MEF2D in the cytoplasm. MEF2D levels were increased in the brains of α-synuclein transgenic mice and patients with Parkinson’s disease. Wild-type α-synuclein and a Parkinson’s disease–associated mutant disrupted the MEF2D-Hsc70 binding and led to neuronal death. Thus, chaperone-mediated autophagy modulates the neuronal survival machinery, and dysregulation of this pathway is associated with Parkinson’s disease.

MEF2D activity protects neurons from death in vitro and in the substantia nigra pars compacta in a mouse model of Parkinson’s disease (PD) (4). Neurotoxic insults cause MEF2D degradation in part by a caspase-dependent mechanism (5), but how MEF2D is regulated under basal conditions without overt toxicity is unknown. Autophagy refers to the degradation of intracellular components by lysosomes. Relative to macro- and microautophagy, chaperone-mediated autophagy (CMA) selectively degrades cytosolic proteins (6). This process involves binding of heat shock protein Hsc70 to substrate proteins via a KFERQ-like motif and their subsequent targeting to lysosomes via the lysosomal membrane receptor Lamp2a. Dysregulation of autophagy plays a role in neurodegeneration (7–9). However, the direct mechanism by which CMA modulates neuronal survival or death is unclear.

In neurodegenerative diseases, certain populations of adult neurons are gradually lost because of toxic stress. The four myocyte enhancer factor 2 (MEF2) transcription factors, MEF2A to MEF2D, have been shown to play an important role in the survival of several types of neurons, and a genetic polymorphism of the MEF2A gene has been linked to the risk of late onset of Alzheimer’s disease (1–3). In cellular models, inhibition of MEF2s contributes to neuronal death. Enhancing examining the explanation of a peer provide valuable opportunities for students to develop the communicative and metacognitive skills that are crucial components of disciplinary expertise.

References and Notes

14. We use this term to describe the view that learning during instruction occurs by transmission of information from a teacher to a learner.
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