The Case for Peer Coaching in Undergraduate Leadership Education

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Abstract

The integration of leadership coaching in higher education has become increasingly prevalent, evolving from a specialized tool into a mainstream practice aimed at cultivating essential leadership skills in undergraduates. This paper explores the implementation of peer coaching interventions in undergraduate curricula, focusing on two models: The Coaching Trio Exercise and a Peer Coaching Groups (PCGs) class. These models promote self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and adaptability—skills crucial for leadership in today's dynamic workforce. The paper argues that peer coaching offers a scalable, compassionate approach to leadership development, fostering student growth by helping them achieve personal goals while learning to guide others. Peer coaching, distinguished from compliance-based academic and sports coaching, emphasizes co-creation and mutual learning, equipping students with teamwork, communication, and emotional regulation skills sought by modern employers. Through case studies of coaching exercises integrated into leadership courses, this paper highlights the potential of coaching to enhance leadership education and career readiness in undergraduate students, bridging critical gaps in leadership competency development.

Keywords: peer coaching, leadership development, case studies

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Introduction

Leadership coaching has exploded. Coaching, once a rare tool reserved for high-potential employees or underperformers, has become mainstream and an increasingly critical tool in fostering leadership development. The reason for this explosion is, in large part, due to the success coaching has had in developing leaders. Leadership requires a unique combination of skills—self-awareness, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and the ability to guide others toward collective goals—skills that coaching can cultivate and that are particularly important for undergraduates who are preparing to enter a rapidly evolving workforce. This is one reason why leadership coaching has found its way from the workplace to undergraduate education. While many students come to college familiar with coaching in the context of sports or academics, these experiences focus on compliance-based coaching, where external goals are provided, and the coach helps the student achieve them. However, most college experiences do not offer coaching aimed at helping students achieve their own goals or teach them how to coach others—a gap in education that is increasingly significant as employers consistently cite leadership and teamwork skills as highly sought-after yet difficult to find in graduates (Financial Times, 2024).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the implementation of peer coaching interventions in undergraduate education, specifically through two models: The Coaching Trio Exercise and Peer Coaching Groups (PCGs). These coaching models provide opportunities for students to not only enhance their leadership skills but also to practice coaching and peer-led development. By examining how these models can be applied in educational settings, this paper contributes to the broader discussion on scalable coaching interventions that foster leadership development in higher education. These models use coaching with compassion, an approach that we argue is well suited for educational settings because it helps students tap into the skills, behaviors, and leadership vision that they are most interested in (Boyatzis, Smith, & Beveridge, 2013).

Literature Review

This paper focuses specifically on the use of peer coaching interventions in undergraduate education to foster leadership development. Peer coaching is defined as a collaborative relationship between two individuals of equal status, where both are engaged in facilitating each other's personal and professional development (Parker, Kram, & Hall, 2012; Boyatzis, Smith, & Van Oosten, 2019). Peer Coaching Groups (PCGs), a variation of this model, provide an egalitarian, peer-led environment where diverse perspectives are embraced and mutual support is fostered without formal facilitation (Feddeck, 2023). In PCGs, vicarious learning occurs between peers, allowing insights and feedback to transform into a powerful force for community celebration, accountability, and support within the group (Feddeck, 2021).

Coaching is Important for Leadership Development

Coaching is increasingly recognized as essential for fostering leadership skills in undergraduates. Students often come to college with experience in coaching related to sports performance, which continues as they remain involved in collegiate athletics. Additionally, many institutions offer peer academic coaching programs to help students develop critical academic skills. These types of coaching, whether in sports or academics, are generally compliance-based: the coach helps the student achieve externally provided goals, like improving grades or performance on the field (Parker et al., 2018).

However, most undergraduate experiences do not provide students with coaching opportunities that focus on helping them achieve their own personal and professional goals or teach them how to coach others. These coaching skills—focused on personal development, leadership, and interpersonal growth—are becoming increasingly critical as employers report that teamwork, communication, and leadership skills are highly sought-after yet difficult to find in job candidates. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reports the most cited skills employers are seeking include the ability to work in a team (80%), flexibility/adaptability (70%), verbal communication (68%), and leadership (52%). These competencies are central to successful leadership, yet they remain underdeveloped in many undergraduate programs (NACE, 2024).

To date, limited scholarship exists on the use of peer coaching in undergraduate leadership education, though peer coaching for leadership development is becoming more common in MBA programs both nationally and internationally. Established programs exist at universities such as Boston University, Case Western Reserve University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Griffith University in Australia. These programs demonstrate that peer coaching is not only valuable but also highly adaptable to various educational contexts,

particularly in developing the leadership qualities that are essential for modern organizational environments (Boyatzis et al., 2019; Feddeck, 2021).

How Coaching is a Tool for Leadership Skills

Coaching and leadership share many overlapping skills, including self-awareness, goal clarity, and reflective practice. By enhancing these abilities, students can become more effective in their leadership roles (Schon, 1983; Kegan, 1994). Coaching provides the structure for students to reflect deeply on their actions, decisions, and aspirations, allowing them to develop a clearer understanding of their goals and how to achieve them. Reflective practice, encouraged through coaching, ensures that students continually assess their progress and adapt their strategies to meet challenges (Boyatzis, 2006).

Leadership in today's complex world requires more than technical knowledge. Leaders must navigate interpersonal dynamics, manage complexity, and remain adaptable in rapidly changing environments (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013). Coaching offers a powerful tool to develop these capacities by encouraging self-reflection, goal-setting, and the development of emotional intelligence. These skills are essential for leaders to manage themselves and their relationships with others effectively (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006).

Through coaching, undergraduates can gain a better understanding of their personal strengths and areas for improvement, as well as learn how to set meaningful, long-term goals. Emotional intelligence, which includes the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others, is particularly important in leadership contexts. Coaching interventions help students cultivate self-awareness and the ability to regulate emotions, which are critical skills for managing teams and leading in complex situations (Boyatzis, 2006, Goleman 1998). Coaching also emphasizes the importance of building strong, authentic relationships based on trust and mutual respect. By fostering a positive mindset and being genuine in their interactions, students can create the conditions for successful teamwork and leadership (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Authenticity in coaching relationships builds the foundation for psychological safety, a key factor in team effectiveness (Edmondson, 2019).

What are the Goals of Coaching for Undergraduate Education?

The goals of coaching interventions in undergraduate education are multi-faceted and focus on the development of key leadership competencies. This is done through learning to coach and ask developmental questions, learning to listen, developing body awareness and emotional intelligence and vicarious learning in Peer Coaching Groups. Coaching interventions aim to teach students how to ask the right questions—those that encourage reflection and self-assessment, pushing their peers toward personal insights and growth (Boyatzis, 2006; Parker et al., 2012). Active listening is a critical skill in both coaching and leadership. By learning to listen attentively, students can develop greater empathy, and a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by others (Rogers, 1951; Kolb & Boyatzis, 1970). Students also learn to pay attention to their own internal experiences while coaching, becoming more attuned to their emotions and body language. This is crucial for fostering authentic, resonant relationships in leadership (Goleman et al., 2013; Boyatzis et al., 2022). In PCG settings, participants can observe their peers in coaching interactions, allowing for vicarious learning. This enables individuals to reflect on the experiences of others and apply those insights to their own development (Bandura, 1977; Feddeck, 2022). Coaching differs from other developmental tools like mentoring in that it focuses on empowering individuals

to explore their own solutions rather than providing advice or answers. Whereas mentoring typically involves a more experienced individual guiding a less experienced one, coaching is a co-created process where both parties share responsibility for learning and development (Boyatzis, Smith, & Van Oosten, 2019).

Links between Peer Coaching and Leadership Skills	
Peer Coaching	**National Association of Colleges and Employers**
Listening and being able to understand the situation	Adaptability
Being able to ask the right questions	Communication
Being able to help others with goal setting and attainment	Creative Problem Solving
Personal development and ideal self, vision clarification	Strong work ethic
Group and team conversation skills	Teamwork

Table 1: Links between Peer Coaching and Leadership Skills

As described in Table 1, peer coaching facilitates the development of key skills that are essential for both leadership and success in the workplace. These skills align with the competencies identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2024).

The alignment between peer coaching skills and the leadership competencies identified by NACE underscores the value of experiential learning for career readiness. By engaging in peer coaching, students cultivate a range of abilities—from communication and adaptability to problem-solving and teamwork—that not only make them better coaches but also prepare them for leadership roles in their future workplaces during their undergraduate education.

In peer coaching, the ability to listen actively and comprehend different perspectives teaches students to remain open-minded and adapt their approach to dynamic situations. This adaptability is critical for effective leadership, where conditions and expectations often change, requiring leaders to pivot swiftly while maintaining composure. The coaching approach they learn from peer coaching is also something that can help them with conflict resolution as listening actively is a great asset in heated situations.

Effective communication begins with knowing what questions to ask. Peer coaches learn how to probe thoughtfully, which sharpens their questioning and listening skills. Leaders with strong communication abilities can better guide their teams, ensuring clarity, understanding, and productive dialogue around action.

Peer coaching often involves supporting others in setting and achieving goals. This inherently develops the capacity for creative problem-solving. Leaders must not only set a

vision for their organizations and team but also devise innovative solutions to meet challenges and see the vision through into reality. Goal achievement as a skill is therefore critical for navigating complex organizational problems.

Through reflection and peer feedback, coaching allows individuals to identify areas for personal growth. This fosters a strong work ethic as students become more aware of their potential and take steps to actualize it. Talking about their vision and what drives them furthermore allows for a strong sense of purpose which is key to a strong intrinsic motivation to move forward even in the face of challenges. Leaders with a well-developed sense of self are more likely to exhibit persistence, diligence, and commitment in the workplace.

A core element of peer coaching is engaging in group discussions and collaborative problem-solving. This reinforces the importance of teamwork in leadership. Effective leaders not only lead teams but are also integral members, working cooperatively towards shared objectives.

Having established the strong connections between peer coaching and essential leadership skills, we now turn to practical applications of these concepts in undergraduate education. Coaching, when thoughtfully integrated into academic settings, has the potential to profoundly enhance students' personal growth, leadership development, and interpersonal effectiveness. The following case studies provide concrete examples of how coaching can be embedded within coursework. The first case study illustrates how a single, structured coaching exercise can be introduced into any leadership or organizational course. The second case study demonstrates a more immersive approach, where an entire course is devoted to peer coaching, offering students continuous opportunities for reflection and skill development. Together, these examples showcase the flexibility and scalability of coaching interventions in fostering essential leadership and workplace competencies.

Case Study Examples

In this section, we explore two case studies that illustrate how to include coaching in undergraduate education. The first case study is a one class teaching exercise that can be scaled and included in any leadership course, while the second case study takes a whole course approach and describes a Peer Coaching Class that has been delivered for four consecutive years.

Case Study One: The Trio Coaching Exercise

One way to implement coaching in undergraduate education is to include it as part of a Leadership/Organizational behavior/Organizational Psychology course. The Trio Coaching exercise is a brief description of such an exercise. This exercise is one that Tracey Messer has been using in her Leadership course for the past few years. This exercise is aimed at helping students gain coaching skills as well as experience being coached. The skills practiced include listening, self-awareness, observation, empathy, adaptability, and flexibility, which are also key leadership skills. Students rotate through three key roles: coach, coachee and observer. Coachees discuss their dreams and ideal self, the coach asks questions provided by the instructor, while the observer listens attentively and provides feedback on the interaction after the mini coaching session is complete. This process allows each student to experience coaching from different perspectives, giving them the opportunity to reflect on both their communication skills and personal growth.

After completing the trio exercise, students are tasked with writing a short 500-word reflection on their experience, where they explore their interactions, their effectiveness as a coach and the insights gained from both observing and being coached. This reflective component is key to the exercise experience. During their reflection and writing processes, supported by prompts, students internalize both the mechanics and value of coaching as a tool for personal and team development. The last question in the reflection is one that invites them to think about where and how they can apply the skills they learned by participating in the Trio Coaching exercise. (This exercise also serves as a springboard for another course assignment, where students are asked to reflect on their ideal self and who they can engage to help them become that self.) By engaging in this structured coaching intervention, students not only enhance their leadership and interpersonal skills but also gain a clear introduction to thinking about their personal goals and realizing how to leverage relationships to support their development.

Class discussion follows the submission of student reflections and the class, as a whole, reflects on the coaching process. This discussion produces a worksheet of questions and language that students have found helpful in their role as coach. A second Trio Coaching session is conducted later in the semester to help students develop a learning plan that supports their 2-3 year short-term goals. Students report that these coaching conversations have supported their personal and leadership development.

Case Study Two: A Peer Coaching Course

While these single use exercises can significantly benefit student leadership development it is equally possible to have a whole course centered on coaching itself. The example we will look at here is a Group Peer Coaching course taught by Maria Feddeck.

An important aspect of youth leadership development is the ability to communicate well and interact in groups. Peer Coaching Groups are peer-led, egalitarian spaces fostering shared growth and discovery. They empower individuals through mutual support and the collective wisdom of diverse perspectives. This journey is built on vicarious learning, accountability, and organizational engagement, free from formal facilitation.

There are two main ways in which individuals may participate in the peer coaching group process: 1) Non-Specific Participation is defined by following structured guidance and uses provided resources, fostering shared discussions and exercises. 2) Specific Participation is defined as focusing on real-life scenarios brought in by members, deepening personal engagement and practical learning (Feddeck, 2023).

Description of Course

The Group Peer Coaching (PCG) course is a semester-long program designed to cultivate leadership skills and foster self-awareness in an environment of peer support. Unlike one time coaching sessions, this course is entirely focused on creating a sustained, peer-led coaching experience that encourages personal growth and mutual accountability. Students participate in Peer Coaching Groups, where they engage in a psychologically safe, egalitarian space that promotes collaborative exploration and shared learning.

Peer Coaching Groups are distinct in that they operate without formal facilitation, allowing students to lead the process and learn from one another's experiences. This approach is grounded in vicarious learning—a process where students gain insights by

observing their peers' experiences, which transforms individual reflections into a powerful, shared resource for growth and engagement. Through this structure, students cultivate skills in communication, emotional intelligence, and leadership, all of which are essential for their personal and professional journeys (Feddeck, 2023).

The Peer Coaching course is structured as follows—the first few sessions are focused on discussing basic elements of coaching skills (listening, giving feedback, reframing and reflection). All the following course sessions are experiential Peer Coaching in Groups sessions. Students are divided into groups of 5-8 people and each class period is a group peer coaching session.

The course begins with a series of classes on essential coaching skills, such as active listening, feedback, and goal-setting. Students are introduced to foundational coaching models like Appreciative Inquiry, the GROW model of goal-setting, and the SBI (Situation, Behavior, Impact) model for giving feedback. In the first five or six classes used to introduce coaching students receive a toolkit with guidelines to support both Non-Specific and Specific participation. The role of the non-specific participation prompt is important to forming expectations and defining the process at hand (Bachkirova et al., 2017).

This initial training sets the stage for the next part of the class which consists of a series of Peer Coaching Group Sessions. As students progress through this part of the course, they engage in a dynamic conversational process of setting goals, exploring values, and navigating personal challenges with the support of their peers. Early sessions may focus on foundational topics, such as why they chose their field of study, while later sessions encourage them to reflect on deeper themes, such as their personal and professional vision. Throughout this journey, the instructor provides guidance in the form of debriefs and discussions at the start of each session, which allows students to share their reflections and build a stronger sense of group cohesion. Conversations in the PCG's gradually shift from structured prompts to more open, personal sharing. This means that students shift from the non-specific participation prompts to more specific participation prompts.

Non-Specific Participation, is where students respond to general prompts provided by the instructor. For example, prompts might include reflecting on the values that guide their career choices or discussing their vision for their future. This type of participation creates a structured foundation that helps students explore broad themes while building trust within the group.

Specific Participation is where students bring real-life challenges or experiences into the group. This encourages practical application of coaching skills and personal engagement, as students apply what they have learned to situations that matter deeply to them.

Experience of Students within the Peer Coaching Course

Students experience the Group Peer Coaching course as a deeply transformative journey. Many initially find it challenging to engage in self-disclosure and vulnerability, especially in a group setting where psychological safety must be carefully cultivated over time. Course leaders address this by emphasizing that all forms of participation are valuable—whether it's sharing personal insights or simply listening and observing. This helps students understand that reflection and silence are integral parts of the coaching process (Feddeck, 2021).

As students become more comfortable within their groups, they begin to open up, sharing their personal experiences and benefiting from the collective support of their peers. For some, the course provides a rare opportunity to candidly discuss their goals, setbacks, and aspirations, while others find value in observing their peers' journeys, which can lead to unexpected personal insights.

The transformative power of the Group Peer Coaching course is perhaps best captured in the reflections of students who participated. One student reflected: "Peer coaching is not just about receiving advice; it's about building a supportive partnership where we all learn and grow together." This sentiment captures the essence of the course, which fosters an egalitarian environment where everyone learns from each other's experiences. This sentiment underscores the collaborative and egalitarian nature of peer coaching, which contrasts with traditional, hierarchical coaching models. Through this approach, students gained not only practical problem-solving skills but also insights into the human aspects of leadership and support. As one student expressed, "People would rather talk their way into their own solutions themselves than accept and implement something given to them by someone else, and that is valuable knowledge." Another student captured the profound sense of companionship fostered within the group: "At several critical moments, their humanity inspired mine. I saw firsthand how peers provide an oasis of rejuvenation along daunting journeys. Hard roads turn lighter when traveling together." This experience of mutual support and self-discovery, built on trust and shared vulnerability, reflects the course's impact on students' personal growth and emotional intelligence. As students learned to balance aspects of their lives and recognize the importance of self-awareness, they were given, in the words of one participant, "the tools necessary to identify what is on their scales and how much of their life they need to allocate to each side." Through this process, students emerged not only with enhanced leadership skills but with a sense of shared journey and belonging, well-prepared to navigate both personal and professional challenges ahead.

Outcomes, Learning Objectives, and Insights

The course is structured around several key learning objectives that focus on developing leadership and interpersonal skills, enhancing self-awareness, and fostering collaborative problem-solving. Through their participation in the course, students are expected to:

- Develop leadership and interpersonal skills by practicing active listening, giving feedback, and reframing challenges

- Enhance self-awareness and emotional intelligence through reflective exercises and personal sharing

- Foster collaborative problem-solving and mutual support through vicarious learning.

These learning objectives are echoed in the students' reflections on the course. Many students reported a deepened sense of self-awareness and interpersonal growth, and expressed a profound sense of solidarity with other students.

The course also provides practical tools for balancing different aspects of life and setting meaningful goals. One student described this process as gaining "the tools necessary to identify what is on their scales and how much of their life they need to allocate to each side." By the end of the semester, students leave the course equipped to navigate both

academic and professional challenges with resilience, empathy, and self-awareness, supported by the insights and skills they have gained through peer coaching.

In summary, the course serves as a model for integrating peer-led coaching into undergraduate curricula. By fostering a psychologically safe and inclusive environment, this course empowers students to develop essential leadership and interpersonal skills, laying a foundation for lifelong growth. Future research could explore the long-term impact of peer coaching on student leadership development and examine how similar programs could be adapted across disciplines to support a wide range of learning objectives.

Preparing for Pitfalls

It is important to understand and realize that not every student will be immediately able to engage in self-disclosure and vulnerability. This is because psychological safety is something that does not happen instantaneously and the development of self-awareness is a turbulent journey for many. Nietzsche described self-awareness and personal growth as a tumultuous, difficult process that required questioning established values and confronting uncomfortable truths about oneself. The impact of society on who we are and want to become, sometimes described as the "ought self" (Boyatzis, 2006), often inhibits individuals from thinking about and sharing their stories. The fear here could be the unwillingness or inability to disclose various social identity labels along with an unwillingness to recognize a lack of adherence or sense of belonging to social identity group membership.

Questioning adherence to social group membership may lead to a newfound awareness of self that highlights a lack of belonging to social identity groups that were salient in their family or dominant culture. Ought self and real self incongruity is discussed by many authors, from Rutger Bergman (2020), who talks about how our nature has evolved in ways that are sometimes at odds with societal expectations, to Richard Boyatzis, who discusses the ought self as one of the key inhibitors of the ideal self (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008).

Conclusion

The case studies above are just two examples of how the powerful interpersonal skills of coaching can be brought to undergraduate students in various ways. Whether coaching is included in a one class session or becomes the focal point of a whole course, its benefits, on personal development, emotional intelligence and self-awareness, will nurture participants' learning and professional journeys. Students learn not only about themselves but also how to act as coaches and, most importantly, how to embody a coaching mindset. Perhaps it is through the education of these young minds that we will be able to democratize coaching and make it something that is valued and included in every organization.

Coaching is the secret weapon ubiquitous in team work and development. Coaching conversations help us manage and improve psychological safety at work and reduce burnout (Dyrbye et al., 2019). Interpersonal communication is something that is crucial to success at any work or cultural level and is also greatly improved through application of a coaching perspective and mindset. Peer coaching groups create a psychologically safe environment where students can openly reflect on their strengths, challenges and aspirations. The PCG environment as well as the Trio Coaching exercise encourage the kind of deep reflection and skill building necessary for leadership development.

Integrating coaching into undergraduate education offers an invaluable opportunity to foster leadership, self-awareness and personal growth in students. Drawing from theories like Intentional Change Theory (Boyatzis, 2008), coaching provides a structured yet flexible platform for students to bridge the gap between their ideal self and their vision for the future or real selves. Through coaching experiences students confront the often-turbulent journey of self-discovery and development, supported by genuine emotional drivers like hope and intrinsic motivation, rather than external pressures from the ought self. By embedding coaching into undergraduate curricula educators help students cultivate not only leadership skills but also the emotional and interpersonal skills needed to thrive in today's collaborative, rapidly changing world. Coaching therefore is a critical element in preparing future leaders for both personal and professional success.

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