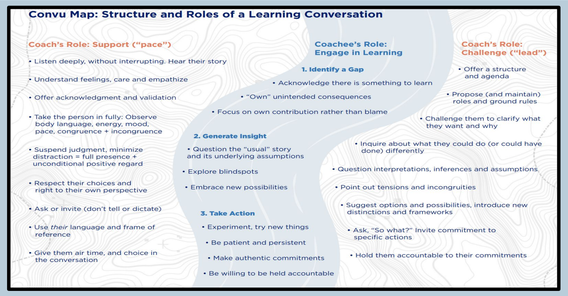
“Are Peers an Overlooked Resource? A Preliminary Analysis of the Socio-Cultural Effects of Convu Peer Coaching in a University Community”

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[1]Harvard University Peer Coaching Initiative

Background

- Our guiding question was whether members of a university community could reliably help each other to cope and thrive.
- The context was the scarcity of counseling and support services for students at Harvard in comparison to the demand for such services, and a “presidential” mandate to shift from a culture of “achieving at all costs” to one of “inclusive excellence.”
- Harvard students are highly capable and successful, but are also subject to *competitiveness*, *feeling like an outsider, loneliness, imposter phenomenon*, *stigma* (unwillingness to disclose difficulties), as well as social fragmentation and polarization.
- While these experiences are most often “sub-clinical,” they are risk factors for anxiety and depression, and inhibit learning. They also erode the essential features of a healthy and inclusive learning community–trust, curiosity and the willingness to collaborate.
- This study set out to discover whether students might be an overlooked resource in addressing these issues.
- Our hypothesis was that with the right prompts and guidance–using the “Convu” methodology–students of all backgrounds could tap into, and cultivate, a natural ability to listen to each other effectively–and in so doing, help each other to cope and thrive.



Methods

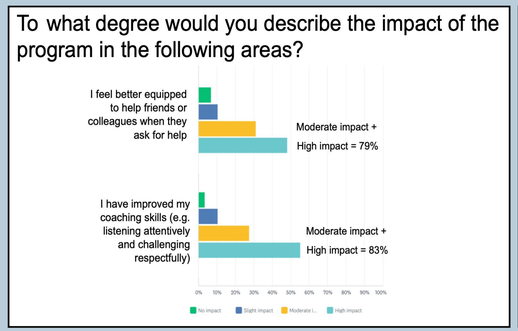
- Interested Harvard graduate and undergraduate students registered to participate in an extra-curricular Peer Coaching Program
- 200 applicants completed a “pre-survey” and specified their preferences for whom they would feel comfortable communicating with openly and honestly (17 undergraduates and 183 graduate students)
- We selected 60 participants semi-randomly; and waitlisted the rest. The waitlist group (“non-participants”) also completed surveys and interviews, providing a control group.
  - 30 participants were selected at random
  - 30 participants were selected so as to achieve the “best match” with the first 30
- Participants were instructed to follow a simple “peer coaching” protocol and meet with their assigned partner once a week over the course of the semester. Importantly, participants took turns being in the role of "Coach" and "Coachee"
- After the program, a “post-survey” was completed by 28 participants and 21 waitlisters
- One-hour Interviews were conducted with 9 participants
- 98 “Session Reflections” were completed immediately after peer coaching sessions

Results

Participant Demographics

- 12 Harvard “Schools” were represented, including the College, Public Health, Medicine, Design, Engineering, Education, Business, Government, and Arts & Sciences
- 75% identified as BIPOC, 23% identified as white, 2% preferred not to say
- 68% identified English as their second language
- 33% identified as the first generation in their family to attend higher education

Finding # 1: Participants were able to provide effective listening to their peers.



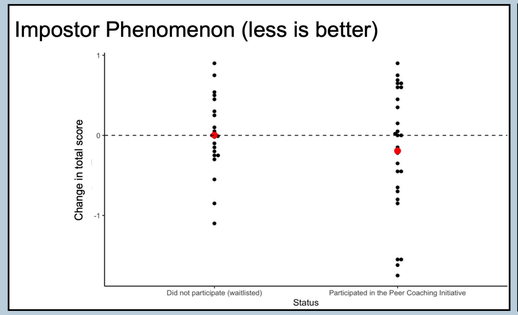
"I am surprised how frequently I am asking open ended and prompting questions rather than [reacting] in conversations. It's a great feeling to see I have helped someone think through something…" (Master’s Candidate at HCSPH)

“When I feel ready to say, ‘this is what I think,’ I delay giving advice for one or two moments and say instead, “How do you feel about that?” (Ph.D. Candidate, GSD)

“I learned to listen. Listening helped me to get all the information: When you interject and give advice, you don’t get the whole story.”(Master’s Candidate at HCSPH)

- A majority of participants felt they improved their coaching skills (83%)
- The more a participant practiced, the more effectively they learned to listen.
- Our standard for “effective listening" was that the “coachee” (i.e. beneficiary of the listening) felt more empowered at the end of a session–that they had more clarity, insight or motivation about something of importance to them.
- By this standard, peer coaches provided effective listening in 90.8% of 98 documented sessions.

Finding #2: Effective listening helped participants to cope and thrive in a high-pressure environment.



“Peer Coaching was a safe space of trust and confidence—it wasn’t just called a safe space: it really was a safe space.” (Master’s Candidate at HGSE)

“Peer Coaching led to a shift in my sense of belonging. Just having my Peer Coach as one of my rocks throughout the semester gave me a sense of security or stability.” (Master’s Candidate at HCSPH)

“It can be difficult for foreign students to feel included; peer coaching is a good program for foreign students to feel connected and included.” (Master’s Candidate at GSD)

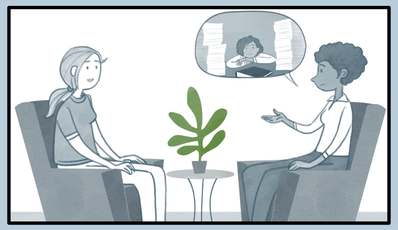
- Participants (vs the control group of waitlisted students) scored higher on *Sense of Belonging* and the *Brief Inventory of Thriving* scales, and lower on *Loneliness* and *Imposter Phenomenon* scales.
- In their own words, recipients of effective listening described feeling more confident, resourceful, connected and hopeful.

Discussion

- Compared to the expansion of counseling or “executive coaching” services, peer coaching is inherently accessible, affordable and scalable.
- When implemented effectively, it may be an effective tool for addressing mental and cultural health challenges in many schools, workplaces and communities.
- Though not a substitute for professional counseling, peer coaching can reduce demand for specialized resources and help to mitigate “pre-clinical” factors like loneliness, imposter phenomenon and the stigmatization of vulnerability and mental health challenges, which often impact populations disparately.
- The results provide preliminary insight into the impact of the Harvard University Peer Coaching Initiative. It’s limitations include: (1) the small sample size (28 participants and 21 control group members responding), and that (2) these data are reflective of one institution, Harvard University (the larger institutional culture could have an impact on the program’s effectiveness).
- More research should be conducted with a larger sample size and across different institutions to produce a more robust analysis.

Conclusion

- We conclude that “peers” themselves may be an overlooked resource for bidirectional social skill enhancement and inclusive culture enablement.
- We found that participants in the Peer Coaching Program came from a range of backgrounds (not just budding therapists or ministers) and were able to tap into, and cultivate, a natural ability to listen effectively, and make a difference to each other.
- Peer coaches reported that their new skills (including listening and openness) were transferable to classrooms, workplaces and family lives.
- Further research is required to determine to what degree, and under what conditions, such skills become “contagious”--meaning other members of a community, who did not participate in peer coaching, imitate, reinforce, and normalize the new behaviors.





Acknowledgments

Members of the Team that helped to support and implement this program:

- Lisa Laskow Lahey, Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- David Van Vactor, Director, Biological and Biomedical Sciences Graduate Program, Harvard Medical School
- Mary Beaulieu, Assistant Dean and Director, Office of Career Advancement, Harvard Kennedy School of Government
- Bradley Coleman, Director, Curriculum Fellows Program, Harvard Medical School
- Allison Pingree, Teaching and Learning Lab, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- Anne Occhipinti, Assistant Dean for Professional Education, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
- Fawn Phelps, Director, Leadership Development, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
- Jane Finn-Foley, Assistant Director of Student Services, Harvard Kennedy School of Government

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