

# **Peer-led Learning Communities: Exploring Integrative High-Impact Educational Practices for Leadership Education**

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## **Abstract**

The use of high-impact practices is well documented in higher education literature. This brief describes the integrative practice of undergraduate peer-led leadership learning communities as a model of delivery within a large introductory leadership education course for first-year students. Utilizing open-ended questions embedded within end-of-semester teaching evaluation surveys, we analyzed students' perceptions of the learning community experience and the peer leader's role. Our findings illustrate how peer leaders play a critical role in fostering a vibrant leadership learning community, which contributes to students' positive perceptions of their own leadership learning and development.

## **Introduction**

Leadership education has been defined as the “pedagogical practice of facilitating leadership learning in an effort to build human capacity” that is “informed by theory and research” (Andenoro et al., 2013, p. 3). The role of a leadership educator includes not only the facilitation of innovative practices for leadership learning, but also engagement in research and evaluation of practice that confirms impact on student learning and informs teaching pedagogy, curriculum development, and program design. A recent Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) report describes research-supported practices shown to develop students' capacity for of socially responsible leadership: socio-cultural conversations with peers, the development of mentoring relationships, membership in off-campus organizations, and community service (Dungan, Komada, Correia, & Associates, 2013). Priest and Clegorne (2015) highlighted how educators committed to developing socially responsible leaders may share some of the assumptions, outcomes, and best-practices guiding contemporary higher education learning. The *Liberal Education and America's Promise* (LEAP) initiative advocates for the use of high-impact educational practices in pursuit of intellectual, personal, and socially responsible learning outcomes that prepare students for a diverse and changing world (AAC&U, 2007; Kuh, 2008). High-impact practices (HIPs) are purposeful strategies proven to promote active learning and increase student retention and enrollment. Such practices are characterized by purposeful tasks

requiring devoted time and effort, extended interaction with faculty and peers, engagement with diverse people and experiences, frequent feedback, application to multiple contexts, and increased understanding of self and others (Kuh, 2008). Some examples include: first-year seminars, learning communities, collaborative assignments, and service learning (Kuh, 2008).

This application brief highlights how high-impact strategies are not necessarily distinct practices; they can form an integrative approach for higher education leadership learning and development. We will describe how two proven high-impact practices: mentoring (Dugan et al., 2013) and learning communities (Kuh, 2008) are utilized within a large Introduction to Leadership Course for first-year students. Then, we will describe our evaluation of this integrative practice through a qualitative research process. The guiding questions are as follows:

1. What are first-year students' perceptions of their learning and leadership development within small-group learning communities as part of a large, introductory leadership course; and
2. How do class leaders (peer leaders) facilitate students' learning and leadership development within these communities?

## **Review of Related Scholarship**

### **Learning communities**

Learning communities are linked courses or educational cohorts that promote personal connection through shared intellectual experiences, engagement and knowledge integration through collaborative learning, and student-faculty interaction inside and outside the classroom (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008). Learning communities are usually organized by theme, subject, or area of student interest, and may also be connected to residences or places of meeting (Brower & Dettinger, 1998). Participation in learning communities has been shown to contribute to student success, including enhanced academic performance, sense of community, friendships and student interaction, engagement with faculty, and satisfaction with the college experience (Jaffee, Carle, Phillips, & Paltoo, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). There are only a few studies conceptualizing learning communities as a strategy or framework for leadership education practice in higher education (see Finnegan, 2012; Nahavandi, 2006; Priest, 2012). A common contextual factor of these studies is an emphasis on teaching leadership to first-year college students.

### **Peer mentoring/peer leadership**

A mentor is defined as a person (i.e., faculty, staff, employer, family members, community member, or peer) who intentionally assists a student's growth or connects them to developmental opportunities (Dugan et al., 2013). Peer mentoring through leadership positions have been traditionally linked to residential life and orientation programs; today they are a popular strategy in diverse university settings, including academic courses and leadership programs (Shook & Keup, 2012). Peer mentoring is said to contribute to students' adaptation, persistency, social development, satisfaction, and performance in college (Bunting, Dye, Pinnegar, & Robinson, 2012; Collings, Swanson, & Watkins, 2014; Ganser & Kennedy, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010; Shook & Keup, 2012). Peer mentors often play multiple roles (Colvin &

Ashman, 2010) and have also been described in the literature as peer tutors (Topping, 1996), class leaders (Finnegan, 2012), undergraduate leadership teaching assistants (Odom, Ho, & Moore, 2014), peer educators (Newton & Ender, 2010; Owen, 2011), peer facilitators (Velez, Simonson, Cano, & Connors, 2010), and peer leaders (Priest, 2012; Shook & Keup, 2012). This brief uses the terms *peer leader* and *class leader* interchangeably. *Class leader* describes the specific position title in our case example; however, these students are also considered *peer leaders* due to their multi-faceted roles within a leadership education context.

## Overview of Practice: Peer-Led Learning Communities

Situated within a large mid-western land grant university, Kansas State University emphasizes a civic mission through an inclusive, interdisciplinary undergraduate minor in Leadership Studies. To accommodate the nearly 900 first-year students who enroll in Introduction to Leadership Concepts each fall semester, the Staley School of Leadership Studies utilizes a pedagogical approach that blends large group and small group experiences. Multiple course sections of approximately 100-120 students meet for a two-hour block each week over a 15-week semester. The first 50 minute block is led by an instructor who presents key concepts in an engaged lecture format. During the next 50 minute block, students move into learning communities of 10-12 people. Facilitated by peer leaders (called class leaders), learning communities are designed to engage students in reflection and application activities. Class leaders are junior or senior level students who have previously taken the course.

Class leaders engage in a rigorous selection and training process, including an eight-week spring course and weekly class prep sessions in the fall. In addition to facilitating weekly learning community sessions, class leaders dedicate around 10 hours per week for preparation, planning, grading, meeting with students, and assisting with service projects and out-of-class activities. Class leaders are also expected to share the values and mission of the school, serve as role models for students, help them adapt to the university environment, and encouraging students' engagement in campus and community activities.

## Method of Evaluation

To answer our guiding questions we analyzed two optional, open-ended questions included on TEVAL (teaching evaluation) surveys administered in fall 2013. The survey questions were: (a) What aspects of your learning community contributed most to your leadership development? and (b) How did your class leader facilitate your leadership development through your learning community experience? Because the TEVAL surveys were administered anonymously, we did not have access to individual participant demographics. The responses from 621 surveys were downloaded into a Microsoft Excel™ file for formatting and removal of any identifying information (e.g., names of individual class leaders). The resulting data set included 636 unique statements (228 statements in response to question one and 408 statements in responses to question two). We used NVivo10™ software to manage the qualitative analysis process. We began by reading through the data set and making notes, which allowed us to get an overall feel for the data, form initial codes, and start focusing the analysis (Creswell, 2007). Several types of codes were used throughout the analysis, including descriptive, in-vivo, and process codes (Saldaña, 2009). In addition to coding, we employed a

variety of analytic tools to generate, develop, and verify concepts over time, including sketching ideas, reflective note-taking, diagramming, reducing codes to categories, and relating categories to the analytic framework of the literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Loftland, Snow, Anderson & Loftland, 2006).

## Results

Our analysis of students' free response comments generated seven categories, resulting in two primary themes. Although these themes and categories are discussed separately, they are interconnected: Students' perceptions of their experience in the learning community reflect the roles and practices of the class leader.

### **Theme One: The small group experience facilitates leadership learning.**

Theme one addresses our first guiding question, helping educators understand first-year students' perceptions of their learning and leadership development within small-group learning communities as part of a large, introductory leadership course. Students described their participation in a small group learning community as providing a positive environment for learning, allowing them to engage with multiple, diverse perspectives, bringing theory to life, and helped them become more aware of their own learning and growth.

**Providing a positive learning environment.** The students emphasized the importance of a safe, comfortable environment to their own learning and development. Students described how the small group setting allowed for them to bond with one another and their class leader. Within this environment, students felt open to freely share stories and ideas, or ask questions without judgment. For example:

- *It became easier to be myself and say the things that I wasn't understanding.*
- *There was no need to fear ridicule.*
- *Once the group got more comfortable, it was easier to learn in our learning community.*

**Engaging diverse perspectives.** Another positive facet of the learning community was the opportunity students had to look at topics through multiple perspectives, and engage with others in leadership activities that highlighted diverse styles and approaches. Students reported that the learning community experience:

- *Helped to open our eyes to so many different views and opinions of leadership.*
- *Allowed me to broaden my view of leadership*
- *Emphasized that everyone has different values and ideas and strengths*

Students learned that they could leverage the diversity of their groups by working in teams, specifically noting the value of exercising inclusive and democratic leadership. This stretched not only their view of leadership, but their leadership practice as well. One student said:

- *We were all leaders so when it came to get something done we had to start using different types of leadership styles that many of us had never tried before because it couldn't just be one person leading everybody else.*

**Increasing self-awareness.** As students participated in the activities of the learning community (group discussions, team service projects, reflection, etc.), they not only learned about leadership, but also gained self-awareness that contributed to their leadership identities and capacities. Students gained clarity on their personal values and recognized the importance of community values. They found that the learning community helped them become a more active learner. Some began to see themselves more clearly as leaders and how they could exercise leadership now and in the future. For example:

- *It really helped me develop my leadership philosophy.*
- *I learned about myself and other and how to include leadership into my career field.*
- *I learned about myself as a leader and how groups can work together to be influential.*
- *I have found my true self. Small group helped me become...me.*

### **Theme Two: Peer leaders play multiple, integrated roles within the learning community that support students' leadership learning.**

This theme answers our second guiding question by providing insight into the role of class leaders, specifically, how class leaders (peer leaders) facilitate students' learning and leadership development within these communities. Students' described how peer leaders engaged as community builders, role models, and facilitators who managed technical course element while demonstrating effective teaching strategies.

**Community builder.** Students shared specific peer leaders' actions that contributed to a comfortable learning environment. Peer leaders created a sense of inclusion and trust by building relationships with and among students. Students reported that peer leaders were good listeners, patient, supportive, encouraging, respectful of different points-of-view. They took a genuine interest in every student, both in and out of class. For example, students said their peer leader:

- *Fostered such a sense of community and family in our group.*
- *Helped us to become a team and work together as a group of leaders not just a group of individuals.*
- *Taught me to be more confident in my ideas and express my opinions in the classroom setting.*

**Role model.** Students described peer leaders as inspiring and motivating. They recognized the peer leader's contribution to making progress on their own "*leadership potential*". Students became more interested in leadership due to their peer leader's own excitement and passion for the subject. One student reported that their peer leader as "*not only a role model, but a friend*"; another said of their peer leader: "*[She] ... encouraged me to come out of my shell more and search for leadership roles on campus.*"

**Teaching assistant.** This category describes how peer leaders played what may be considered a more traditional, technical role in assisting the lead instructor with course management. Students described peer leaders as being well prepared, organized, and available to answer questions. They appreciated when peer leaders were "*fair with grading*", and "*willing to give help and feedback on assignments.*" Additionally, they valued when peer leaders provided weekly reminders of deadlines and expectations.

**Facilitator of learning.** Students described specific techniques peer leaders used to enhance their academic learning. Peer leaders helped reinforce concepts from the larger lecture in “*fun and exciting ways*”, for example through personal examples or games. Student said that peer leaders:

- *Put it [topics] in a different way to make sure we all understood it.*
- *Went more in depth on the topics we discussed in large lecture and broke it down so that we all could understand.*

Peer leaders did more than just review the material, they used a variety of learning strategies to stimulate group discussion, critical thinking, and personal application. Of note was the use of powerful, “*well-placed*” questions to “*keep discussion going*” and allow students to “*learn from each other.*” Other students described it this way:

- *[My peer leader] always managed to cut through some of the surface level topics and breach into the other levels of thinking very quickly, which helped our small group delve into the issues much more effectively.*
- *[She was] great about asking specific questions to spark thoughts and ideas to help us push ourselves to become better leaders.*
- *He asked questions, we gave answers, and he replied with "Why?" He was constantly encouraging us to think more deeply on the subject.*

In addition to asking powerful questions, students repeatedly described how peer leaders facilitated their learning through a tension - or balance of - control, direction, and structure with autonomy, ambiguity, and freedom. For example:

- *Was always there to direct our discussions and help us if we got stuck but she also encouraged us to have our own discussions and to find our own answers.*
- *He would not just "hold our hands" as we went over material but would force us to think critically by creating time for him to step back and observe while we [the students] carried on the discussion ourselves.*
- *She would step in when we were struggling with topics and would suggest ideas. She would also start the discussions but then let us do the talking and thinking.*

Students described how peer leaders provided a foundation, or guiding path for the day and then challenged them to become more self-directed. They described how the peer leaders’ facilitative approach was important in helping them grow as leaders. Essentially, this balance allowed peer leaders to creating conditions for students to exercise leadership within the learning community environment.

- *A lot of times ... she would tell us what she expected and then step back and let us do our thing while still overseeing us. I really liked that a lot and I feel like it allowed for a lot of growth in our group.*
- *She ... required our learning community to lead the discussion, yet she provided input when it was necessary. She didn't dictate our group and gave us a lot of freedom which allowed us to actually practice leadership which was wonderful.*

## Reflection & Recommendations

This application brief describes research informing the integrative high-impact practice of peer-led learning communities within an introductory leadership course. The model of peer-led learning communities reflected a learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda, 2004), specifically creating conditions in which knowledge is socially constructed, learning is situated in the learner's experience, and learners mutually share authority and expertise (2004). These conditions for learning created a community, or structure of belonging (Block, 2009) through which transformational learning can happen. Not only did peer-led learning communities reinforce outcomes deemed essential for exercising leadership in a diverse and changing world (AAC&U, 2007; Kuh, 2008), they also illustrated what Ganz and Lin (2012) described as a "pedagogy of practice" (p. 353). That is, as peer leaders exercised leadership through their various roles in the learning community, they created an environment that impacted not only what student learned about leadership, but how they learned it. In this way, peer leaders were creating conditions that allowed students to develop their own identities as leaders, and provided them space and opportunity to exercise leadership with one another.

These results support the use of peer-led learning communities as part of a leadership education course or program. They also provide a conceptual model to inform selection and training of new peer leaders serving in a class leader role. We believe the following recommendations for practice are valuable to anyone who seeks to utilize peer-led learning communities as part of a leadership education program or course:

- The utilization of peer led-learning communities requires a significant investment of time and/or resources (depending on if it is a volunteer or paid position). Faculty who utilize this high-impact practice should be prepared to engage in rigorous selection, training, and on-going mentoring of peer leaders.
- The hiring process of peer leaders should reflect attention to the characteristics of the role, allowing for examination qualities such as care for other students' growth and development; demonstrating reliability and responsibility to commitments; effective interpersonal communication and relationships building skills, and commitment to the mission of the program.
- Peer leader training should include development in skills related to attention to tasks and attention to relationships, as well as extended training in facilitation and teaching techniques that foster engagement, critical thinking, and application.

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