



WeCoach:Student2Student – Peer Learning Circles for Youth Program Overview May-August 2020

How it came to be

In April 2020, two brothers, one then a high school junior and the other a college student, found themselves lamenting how hard the pandemic lockdown was hitting them and their friends who are teens and young adults. They were considering how they might help youth like themselves navigate this trying period.

Serendipitously, their mom, Betsy Quint-Moran (a recent graduate of George Mason University's Leadership Coaching for Organizational Well-Being program), had been chatting with her cohort from George Mason about how they might do something to collectively help others during the pandemic. Based on the thoughts her boys were surfacing, she discussed the idea of working with her coaching cohort colleagues to coach youth pro-bono during COVID as a way of using the extra time to "make lemonade out of the lemons." She brought this idea up to a PCC peer coaching friend, Dana Karp, the day before a Global Virtual Peer Learning Summit; Dana suggested the Summit might give Betsy some ideas for her youth coaching program. The goal of the Summit was to share the power of peer learning and encourage participants to form their own circles, cascading the model to benefit more people.

Betsy's peer learning circle experience at the Summit sparked an idea: What if, instead of trying to coach teens and young adults one-on-one, she

could bring the peer learning circle concept to youth during this trying time? She floated the idea by one of the Summit organizers and evangelists, Chuck Appleby, who connected Betsy with colleague Valerie Lingeman, PCC, who had also expressed interest in working with youth.

A fruitful collaboration resulted. Betsy, her sons, Camillo and Adriano, and Valerie partnered with a local non profit organization, the [Safe Community Coalition](#) (SCC) to pilot [WeCoach:Student2Student](#), a peer learning circle program for local high school and college youth to help them weather the stress and isolation of the pandemic with resilience and connection.

The Peer Coaching Process

WeCoach used a peer learning circle process called the HELP method, refined by [Chuck Appleby](#) and demonstrated at the Global Virtual Peer Learning Summit in April. The HELP process mirrors the flow of a coaching conversation.

- One member of the circle facilitates process.
- Following a check-in and review/discussion of circle norms, one circle member – the challenge owner -- presents a challenge, priority, or opportunity they would like some help thinking through.
- Circle members – peers – use powerful questioning to help the challenge owner explore their priority more deeply.
- Following the inquiry process, the challenge owner makes requests of the circle and circle members make offers of assistance in response.
- The challenge owner states actions she will take as a result of the conversation.
- Circle members help the challenge owner explore supports and obstacles to taking action.
- The circle closes with a period of reflection that focuses on the circle process, the quality of trust among circle members, what worked well and what circle members could do to make the process more helpful next time.
- When the circle next convenes, the challenge owner reports to her peers what actions she took as a result of the circle conversation, and what results she observed or experienced.

Outcomes:

[WeCoach: Student2Student](#) created opportunities for young adults to build relationships, develop their leadership skills, and receive help and support from other young adults during Covid-19.

Youth participants reported their circle experience helped them:

- build problem-solving skills
 - expand their networks of trusted relationships with both peers and adult mentor/coaches
 - reduce boredom
 - reduce isolation
 - increase focus and motivation
 - grow as leaders
 - become comfortable facilitating groups
 - grow their self-confidence
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- Three of the four circles elected to continue meeting monthly following the pilot. One group is exploring the idea of doing an outdoor walking circle.
 - More than half of the youth circle leaders and at least three circle participants expressed interest in helping grow WeCoach so it can reach a greater number of students. One circle leader, a sophomore in high school, is hoping to “be a circle leader for the rest of her high school career.”

The Program Model:

Vision: WeCoach’s vision was to develop a peers-leading-peers model where students would help each other with everyday issues using a structured group coaching process.

Timing: We developed and ran the WeCoach pilot between May and August 2020.

Program Design: Organizing WeCoach, Valerie and Betsy aimed to give Betsy's sons as much leadership responsibility and opportunity as possible. The young men recruited students for the pilot via social media and word of mouth, drafted marketing communications for the program that went out in school newsletters, emails, and the SCC website, contributed to training, and organized an end-of-pilot in-person celebration and program review.

- Together, the organizing team of four recruited
 - 10 youth who were trained to serve as circle leaders.
 - 10 additional youth who were circle participants.
 - 10 adult mentor/coaches who supported the growth of the circle leaders pro bono. All were graduates of [International Coach Federation](#)-accredited coaching programs. Adult mentor/coaches contributed roughly 10-12 hours each to the program, for a total of over 100 pro bono hours.
- Organizers invested another 80-100 hours of their time, pro bono.
- We enlisted other adults who have decades of experience coaching and developing leaders at all levels in organizations in the public, private, and non-profit sectors to help us train the circle leaders.
 - Circle leaders received 10 hours of training prior to launching their circles.
 - They learned to coach using the proven, structured HELP method, and they learned how to build relationship and trust in a group.
 - We introduced and differentiated basic coaching and facilitation skills.
 - A therapist from the Mental Health Committee of the [Safe Community Coalition](#) trained adult mentor/coaches and youth alike in how to spot more serious clinical issues and ensured circle leaders and mentors could access other mental health resources in the community, should a need arise.
 - A coach with expertise in Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity provided a session on how to talk about sensitive identity issues.
 - A coach/mindfulness expert led a session on resilience.
 - A leadership expert provided a session that invited circle leaders to consider their own leadership aspirations, style,

and challenges, and to use WeCoach as an opportunity to develop their leadership capacity.

- A career coach provided a bonus session focused on career search and choosing a college major.
- The pilot program cost \$1200, or about \$60 per youth participant.

Circle Meetings:

- Four peer circles with 20 participants (total) launched virtually via Zoom in mid-July and met weekly for 90 minutes through early August. The circles helped members with current challenges, questions, and priorities. Each week a different person in the circle raised an issue or challenge important to them and received help from their group. Students appreciated the opportunity to both get support and give support to others during a tough time.
- Adult mentor/coaches attended each circle meeting but left the coaching to the youth. They provided mentoring via private chat during meetings, and on calls before and after circle meetings, as requested by the circle leaders.
- Each youth circle leader also received 2 hours of pro bono 1:1 coaching from their assigned mentor/coach.

Broadly, the kinds of issues that came up in the circles included concerns about school, work, identity and family issues, motivation, time management, feeling isolated during quarantine, and stress and negativity toward on-line school.

Evaluation

We assessed the impact of the program by:

- Issuing a pre-pilot survey to participants
- Issuing a post-pilot survey to participants
- Holding a mid-point feedback/check-in session with circle leaders
- Holding a mid-point feedback/check-in session with adult mentors
- Gathering feedback on structured questions during the close out gathering

Feedback

Here's what youth *participants* said about WeCoach:

“Peer Circles are great because it allows people to meet other people and express their feelings without feeling ashamed. It allows people to feel comfortable with expressing themselves without the fear of judgment, and this is so important because everyone needs at least one person in their lives that they know will listen to them.... It also helps because it improves people's social skills. This could also help communities and groups because these circles have multiple people with multiple solutions for a problem, so people will always be able to have many great solutions to their issues.”

“I LOVED THESE CIRCLES. I'm not even kidding when I say that I was excited for each meeting. Everyone was so comforting and it was like I had made new friends who didn't judge me for my problems.”

Here's what youth circle *leaders* said about WeCoach:

“We Circle Leaders excelled!”

“People found how similar they were.”

“Sharing promoted closeness -- in 1-4 sessions”

“It was crazy to see how much we opened up to one another.”

“...it's become such a comfortable place for people. How comfortable I've become with the process of leading.”

“Openness as the process progressed. You can move organically in the HELP method.”

“People were actually helping. The process really does work when people are open. When I was the challenge owner, I was really helped!”

“How we created a trusting space so fast. Zoom makes it feel more laid back – I wasn’t as nervous.”

Here are a few video testimonials:

From a circle leader -- <https://youtu.be/cQggmLToS3A>

From one of our youth organizers who also served as a circle leader -- https://youtu.be/yYR8pX_mukI

From the parent of a circle leader -- <https://youtu.be/Syl5xgVhw7I>

Next steps:

With the ongoing support of the SCC, the organizers plan to convene youth and adult WeCoach community members to explore how we might evolve the program. We are considering expanding WeCoach to support a greater number of youth in our community, and/or spread the WeCoach model to other youth development organizations, schools, and communities, keeping with our peers-leading-peers model. One thought is to partner respectfully with under-served communities, forming youth-led circles that span diverse groups of people and help dissolve social boundaries.

Questions? Contact us

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