

‘Getting into the flow of university’: a coaching approach to student peer support

Digby Warren and Wilko Luebsen, London Metropolitan University

Introduction

Peer-assisted learning (PAL) schemes, in which more experienced students are trained to guide and facilitate the learning of the less experienced, have been implemented in UK higher education since the early 1990s and are gaining momentum globally (Keenan, 2014). Various types of schemes are in use, but most derive from the ‘Supplemental Instruction’ model developed in the USA in the 1970s, in which ‘high-performing’ students ‘reteach’ subject material to struggling students in ‘high-risk’ courses via voluntary after-class study sessions (Blanc *et al*, 1983; Dawson *et al*, 2014). Advantages offered by PAL include improved student performance, retention, graduation rates, confidence and cohesion, as well as enhancing mentors’ own subject learning and transferable skills (Blanc *et al*, 1983; Green, 2011; Ody and Carey, 2013; Dawson *et al*, 2014; Keenan, 2014). Such schemes can also be vehicles for student partnerships aimed at promoting student engagement (Harrington *et al*, 2016; Ody and Carey, 2013; Keenan, 2014) and for supporting successful transition of first-year students (Andrews and Clark, 2011; Chester *et al*, 2013; Keenan, 2014).

The PASS (Peer-Assisted Student Success) scheme at London Metropolitan University, piloted in 2014/15 and now embedded in all undergraduate degree programmes (courses), constitutes a ‘vertical’ mode (Green, 2011:2) of cross-year-level peer support. It is part and parcel of the delivery of all courses at first-year level, not just focused on ‘difficult’ subjects or borderline students, and guidance offered by our trained and paid ‘Success Coaches’ (SCs) concerns social and personal as well as academic issues. Commonly, the SCs meet first-year students in groups during in-class sessions (seminars, workshops, labs, studios) or, sometimes, additionally-timetabled sessions, anchored around one of the four core 30-credit modules that comprise the first-year curriculum. SCs are also available to provide one-to-one support by individual arrangement. Eschewing any ‘remedial’ approach, our PASS scheme seeks to boost the academic success and engagement of students of all backgrounds and abilities.

This focus on augmenting student engagement is important in our University context where most students are putatively ‘hard to reach’ (or, rather, waiting to be reached) owing to their busy, complex lives, with many commitments to juggle. They share any combination of following characteristics:

- in paid employment;
- mature and return-to-learn students;
- parental or caring responsibilities;
- first in family to go to university;
- London-based commuter students;
- only part-time on campus (but registered full-time).

In our evaluation of the 2015/16 implementation, first-year students commented that PASS sessions were helpful “*to get students into the flow of university*” - for example, enabling better understanding of course content, assessment expectations and use of learning resources, and building confidence and connections among students. They found SCs “*really helpful*”, “*friendly*”, motivating and easy to interact with as peers who already “*had experiences as a student*” and were “*not grading you*”. In this case study, we investigate more closely the nature of this peer relationship, exploring how the coaching philosophy we seek to inculcate in the mentoring role has manifested itself in practice.

Peer mentoring and coaching

As Andreanoff (2016) notes, previous researchers have highlighted the confusion in the literature on peer support between the terms 'mentoring' and 'coaching'. In her analysis of that literature, 'coaching' is often equated with provision of 'guidance' towards goal attainment and maximising performance, whereas 'mentoring' tends to be associated with 'transfer of knowledge' aimed at improving 'social integration'. Andreanoff evaluates a particular 'peer coaching' programme involving 'result-orientated' one-to-one meetings; the 'student coaches' are coaxed to refrain from 'advice giving' and trained in 'effective questioning' to help promote their 'self-efficacy' in the coaches through 'goal and target setting'. It is this kind of approach – viz. employing questions and pointing out options in order to empower first-years in the process of developing their own learning strategies, solutions and abilities - that is encouraged (via exercises and role plays) in the training of SCs in our PASS scheme, although formal coaching techniques are not covered.

In her literature review of PAL, Green (2011) flags up that a key aspect is creating a 'safe, friendly place' to help students adjust to university life and aid the development of 'learning communities'. The PAL 'leader' is 'not the expert but the guide' whose role is to 'facilitate learning rather than re-teaching'; there is less of a 'power imbalance' compared to student-lecturer relationships and peers can engage more freely and fully and concentrate on issues of most significance to the learners. Hilsdon (2013:5) also suggests that the 'relatively symmetrical power relationships' in PAL sessions facilitate course-related learning. From this overview of PAL, it appears that 'coaching' and 'mentoring' elements can overlap; Carnell *et al* (2006) corroborate this from their examination of some definitions: "*coaching tends to be seen as one aspect of mentoring*" but is more about "*bringing about change, whereas in mentoring this is not explicit*" (p.4). Both can involve activities such as "*creating a learning environment*" (the fundamental common feature), "*establishing confidence in the relationship*", "*clarifying learning objectives*", "*listening*", "*experimenting*", "*empathising*", "*questioning*", "*demonstrating*", "*observing*", "*making suggestions*", "*reinforcing*", and "*enabling risk taking and reflection*" (Figure 1, cited from Cordingley *et al*, 2004:4).

"*Peer education*", as Ody and Carey (2013: 293) accentuate, can combine one-to-one and group activity, academic and pastoral support and "*informal, opportunistic, spontaneous and student-led interactions*" alongside the "*formalised, intentional interactions*". Our PASS scheme encompasses all these aspects in a hybrid model in which SCs are encouraged to adopt a coaching style in their peer mentoring.

Case study methodology

To gain insights into the dynamics and effects of this peer relationship, we ran separate focus groups with first-year students and SCs respectively, using image-mediated dialogue as a form of arts-based inquiry. In total, there were thirty-eight participants, twenty-six SCs and twelve first-year students; all were volunteers who responded to an open invitation, and informed consent was confirmed at the start of each session.

Arts-based inquiry is application of the creative arts to the process - and, often, the representation - of social research. Using art forms can generate data beyond the scope of typical qualitative research, in that this approach can "*raise awareness, activate the senses, express the complex feeling-based aspects of social life, illuminate the complexity and sometimes paradox of lived experience [and] jar us into seeing and thinking differently...*" (Chilton and Leavy, 2014:403).

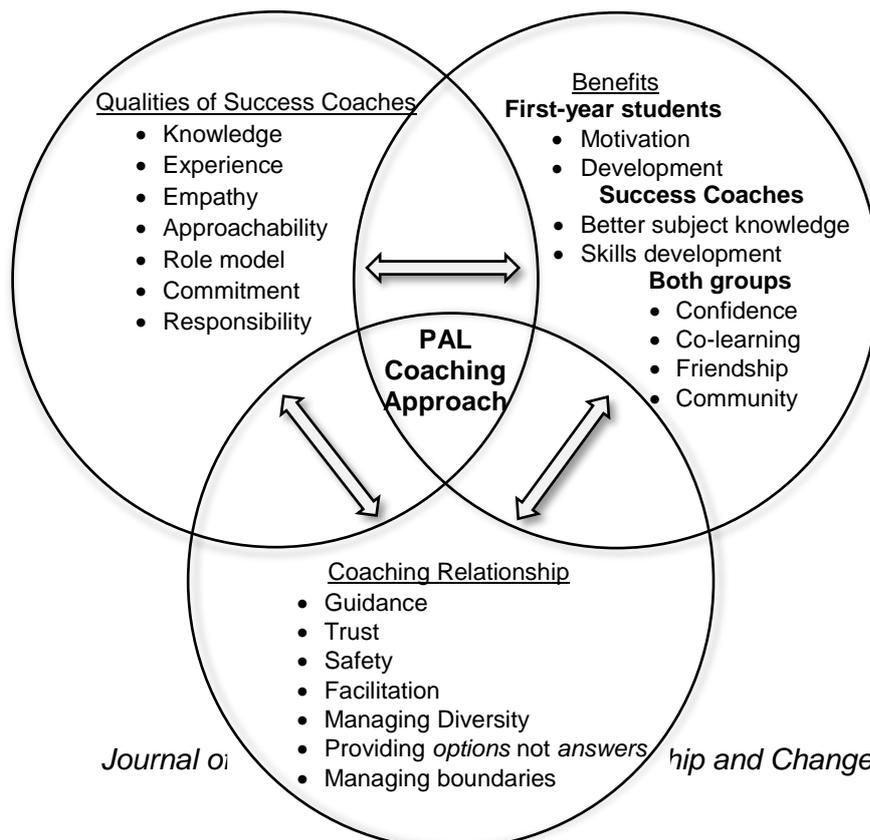
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We assembled a set of semi-abstract images and asked each participant to select an image that symbolised their direct experience of the peer relationship, to discuss this in pairs (as a way of surfacing their perceptions and making it comfortable to talk) and then share their image and thoughts with the group, in a dialogical space where other participants could throw in questions or comments. This process aligned with certain key criteria for quality in arts-based research: “*question/method fit*” and “*artful authenticity*” (Chilton and Leavy, 2014:415, 417). Image-mediated dialogue was congruent with our aim of uncovering the actual dynamics and outcomes of the interactions between SCs and first-years, in a far more evocative way than standard questioning. The method fulfilled the ‘authenticity’ principle by capturing vivid “*details of a lived experience*” (Chilton and Leavy, 2014:417) in the participants’ own voices. All sessions were recorded, with the participants’ permission, and the transcripts closely analysed to identify recurrent themes.

Main themes

The themes emerging from our analysis of what was said in the focus groups illuminate different aspects of the peer relationship, in which a *coaching approach* is strongly reflected in both the *activities* they described and the *language* they utilised, echoing elements articulated in the PAL literature (summarised above). The perceptions of Success Coaches were strongly mirrored by the experiences of the first-year students.

1. The coaching relationship signified by these main themes is represented in the diagram we have devised. The three inter-linked circles symbolise the interconnection between three spheres depicting;
2. The qualities of SCs that enable and are enhanced by;
3. The evolving relationship between first-year students and SCs that, in turn yields the generative benefits both groups experienced.



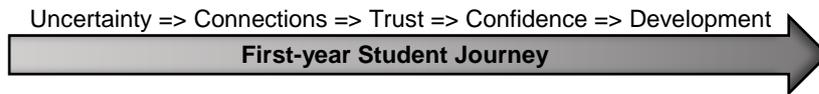


Figure 1: Diagram of the Coaching Relationship

What does the coaching relationship involve?

At its heart, the relationship was seen by both the first-years and the SCs as providing *guidance* - whether about course content, academic tasks, learning resources or work placements, or about more personal issues such as where to find advice about housing and benefits. SCs were conscious that they were “*someone you can look up to and go to for guidance and help*”. And first-years appreciated this guidance and learnt from it: “*They provide a guidance through stuff that I am unsure of or, yeah, give me tips, and... make it easier for me to then approach the task and feel a bit more comfortable about it*”; “[After] the SC came in...*I am getting further, like knowing more, in what the course is about*”.

It was also an interaction that stimulated *motivation*. Again, SCs were deeply aware of this vital aspect of coaching: “*sometimes just having some kind words and say[ing] that they are going [in] the right direction, it is enough for them to stay focused*”; “*I’m trying to just explain to them that if you are going to work hard, no matter where you are now, you can achieve everything*”. This was galvanising for the first-year students: “*they can motivate us... to move forward*”; “*my SC [is] helping me to aim higher, to go higher*”.

Essential to this relationship was creating a sense of *safety*, in which first-year students could feel able to communicate freely, as they said: “*to ask a professor or tutor a question is a bit daunting... It is more secure and comfortable talking to [fellow] students and having an open conversation*”; “*I feel more at ease talking to her [SC]... It makes me feel more free, I can express my personality*.” Naturally, as students themselves, the SCs fully realised the importance of this: “*they feel safe and they gain trust for us. So they are not afraid to ask us questions*”; “*we make sure the students work together in a nice friendly environment*”.

Hence, through the coaching relationship, it was possible to develop a sense of connection and *friendship*, which many SCs sought to build: “*we try to get to know each other, so I know what they are like outside of the course, where they are from, what are their hobbies. They know the same about me so we try to build a bridge between us*”. Even if not all first-year students experienced this - one of them did not find their relationship with the SC “*like a friendly type of thing*”, but was still “*satisfied*” and able to “*learn something*” from each interaction - generally they understood and valued the personal element in the coaching dynamic: “*everyone has a different way of learning, so the more you tell about yourself, [the more] they know how you work*”; “*I have spoken to my SC about... all the coursework, how we feel, building up friendships as well*”. And underpinning the sense of safety and friendship was the sense of trust fostered by SCs in exercising their role.

SCs were mindful of the importance to the coaching relationship of *building trust*: “*they trust you, so they come to you with their issues. It can be very positive, you can grow together*”. They conceived their role primarily in terms of *facilitation* of learning, not teaching: “*we are not there to lecture them. We will be guided by you and what you want*”; “*so I give them [guidance] according to their need and learning*”. This included *managing diversity*: “*Different students in same class... I get their level, their requirements, and then I [guide them] how to get there*”; “*the more engaged students... are easy... [whereas those] who are struggling...*”

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are the ones you have to try and bring in"; "different people, their backgrounds, personalities...but they have got a common interest which is their course". It also required managing boundaries: SCs were aware that it was "a delicate relationship" with "sensitivity and fragility in that bond"; "I will try to approach them but I try not to be too intrusive, I let them reach out to me if they feel the need". At the same time, they needed to keep the right balance: "If you have agreed to help a student, you need to optimise your time, to make sure you have enough time to do your own work, because you need to succeed just as much as they need to succeed".

Above all, SCs understood that, as coaches, they should proffer *options, not answers*, to help the first-years develop their own ways of learning: "You can only guide, you can't dictate how they go about things"; "I want to make them think, not just want the answer from me... and see that they can actually do it themselves". This tack approach was recognised and appreciated by the first-year students too: "the SC will not tell you the solution, but give you tips how to do it"; "they can give you a different approach"; "He [SC] didn't tell us exactly what to do, but he said suggestions on what to write about... and make sure you do your research and... don't plagiarise".

What are the qualities of SCs conducive to coaching?

In the focus-group discussions, several points were mentioned by both parties that evoked the qualities that enabled SCs to fulfil their role. Firstly, there was the *experience and knowledge* that SCs had already gained - "Sometimes they [first-years] can't see the end of the mountain. But we as SCs can, because you are a step higher. So we can encourage them to continue" - and from which the first-year students benefited: "Because [SC] has been first year already, she knows the kind of things that will come up, the help that we need"; "I think it is good because they have been studying the same thing as us. They know how the exams were and how we should prepare our essays".

Being on a similar journey also equipped SCs with a sense of *empathy*: "it [SC] was someone already doing the course, so that meant that they would really understand where I was coming from"; they themselves were conscious of this: "you share a lot of the feelings you both had in the first year". Added to this was the *approachability* of the SCs: "You are more accessible, you are easier to talk to, and students tend to be not so scared to ask you questions rather than asking a lecturer"; that was equally felt by the first-year students: "their approach is good, friendship[-like]"; "The quality is... like, we are the same, equality".

Furthermore, a passionate expression of the *commitment* of the SCs came through: "Yes, you can be seen as a lifeline for students. They know they can turn to you if they feel that they are struggling"; "It is about making them realise [their potential], being there with them, and helping them developing skills and the positive things they have, because they are really wonderful"; and also their sense of *responsibility*: "You have to arrive on time in order to make the most of your scheduled sessions"; "We learn how to work with each other. It is very important". Ultimately, the SCs also realised that they need to be a *role model* for other students: "I made them realise that at some point they will be where I am... You can reach out to me and I can reach out to you.... How they see it is, I'm gonna get good grades, and I can be a SC as well".

What are the benefits to the peers?

For the first-year students, the main benefits included increased *confidence* and *motivation*, and academic and personal *development*. The SCs considered confidence-building to be a key aim and benefit for everyone: "The lecturers don't have the chance to build each student's confidence, so by having a SC [who] is there to build your own confidence, it is

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beneficial to both the students and the SC". The first-year students felt the same: "She [SC] gives me a lot of encouragement, she gives you a big boost"; "in the start, you are not sure what you are doing. And now, the SCs help you, but when they are not there...you know for sure... what you are doing. That is a kind self-confidence I [now] have".

It also helped them to overcome initial *uncertainty*, as the SCs realised: *"a lot of first-years feel overwhelmed. Most of them have never been to university before and... if you don't have someone that you can stretch your arm out and ask for help from, you are just going to keep drowning in the sea of university, fall out of love with your course or what you are interested in, and, basically, maybe drop out"*. And the first-years were deeply grateful and gained hope: *"you are in a dark place, you don't know where to go. When SCs are coming, that is when you start to get to the brighter places"; "it took a lot of stress off and it gave me a lot of hope that I was actually going to pass my exams"*.

The SCs expressed a real sense of commitment to the growth and development of the first-year students: *"For me coaching is helping people to grow"; "As a SC you are there... to help them get to where their goals are"; "You are not there to hold their hand... [but] to help them grow and excel"*. Encouragingly, the first-years felt they were growing in assurance, knowledge and achievement: *"The more I go, I meet them, the more my brain is, like, getting brighter"; "A lot more sure, more understanding about the topic"; "She [SC] sent me some examples of questions we would be doing. So that did pay off, because when... the results came out and I was proud of myself"; "my knowledge is growing and I am succeeding"*.

Similar benefits accrued to the SCs too. They spoke of enhanced *confidence*, deeper *subject knowledge* and development of organisational and communication *skills*: *"I've developed a lot of skills. It helped me as well in speaking to people, confidence and so forth"; "...the benefit of hindsight, like time management"; "Now I can multi-task like a pro"; "It has been a fantastic opportunity to reinforce your own knowledge... to build onto the more advanced things"*.

Besides these common benefits, SCs and first-year students jointly profited from the collaborative opportunities for *co-learning*, *friendship* and *community*. SCs sometimes explored topics together with their coaches: *"Some students are really passionate... and ask me those advanced questions. I feel like it is, like, a challenge for me, because it is quite interesting. We do go those roads and we find things [together]"*. Alternatively, some SCs encouraged first-years to form their own study groups: *"The key for me is teamwork. If they have a question they can help each other, if they have a problem they can help each other"*. SCs also actively cultivated a sense of friendship, not only between themselves and first-years, as we have seen above, but also among SCs themselves: *"We all really get along and meet up frequently....so we have a good working relationship as well as a good personal friendships among us SC. That can help the students, as it can bring togetherness to the group"*. And all these initiatives contributed to building a sense of community: *"We not only facilitate, but we ourselves kind of get connected to different opportunities. You feel that you belong, that you are a part of university and you know each other"*.

Conclusion

In drawing attention to issues of power and control that inhere in peer mentoring schemes, Christie (2014) points out that there are dangers in positioning mentors as 'experts' and mentees as 'passive recipients' that can involve 'overdependence' by mentees and consequent 'disruption to trust' when mentors are not able to deliver on mentees' expectations. What this case study demonstrates is that a coaching approach to peer mentoring can encourage more egalitarian and empowering relations that enable both parties to learn and grow.

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Insights gained through this case study carry several implications for the selection and training of peer mentors within a coaching philosophy:

- Stress the key personal attributes and skills important to nurturing a supportive, encouraging relationship as a peer mentor, apart from the requirement of having a good academic record;
- Emphasise the benefits of PAL and communicate these to new mentors;
- Develop guidance about key challenges in the PAL relationship and how to tackle them;
- Use prime examples from the focus groups to illustrate and clarify what the coaching role as a peer mentor entails;
- Highlight the importance of having a good start when making initial connections with first-year students.

This case study reveals that a PAL coaching approach can facilitate student transformation in the transition year, as students progress from uncertainty towards confidence, development and academic achievement, aided by a sense of connection, direction and trust. It also fosters positive and motivating interactions between different year groups that support the growth of friendship and sense of community belonging.

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