

Research Space

Journal article

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Not on our own: Peer coaching our way through COVID-19

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Abstract

This reflective piece will explore the importance of peer coaching as a tool to support studies, while also addressing the isolative nature of not just doctoral study but also in the authors' wider professional leadership lives. As we all face an extended period at home (and for Lacey and Kerry this means also juggling caring responsibilities and home schooling) the reflective piece will examine how this peer coaching relationship has enabled them to navigate COVID-19, re-constituting themselves as leaders in a spatially and temporally different environment.

Keywords

COVID-19, doctoral study, leadership, peer coaching

*Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?
That depends a good deal on where you want to get to, said
the Cat.*

(Carroll, 2016 [1865])

In this reflective piece, we want to share the importance of peer coaching as a tool, exploring vulnerability and isolation in both our doctoral study and our wider professional leadership lives, both of which have been accentuated during the COVID-19 lockdown.

We invite you into our peer coaching space; where 'professional colleagues working together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine and build new skills' (Robbins, 1991). This space has developed over the last 2 years as we have journeyed through our doctorate programme. The relationship grew from a shared interest in feminist and narrative research. We recognised the value and professional learning from our discussions and chose to continue talking. Drawing from Becker's framework, we describe this relationship as peer coaching; two colleagues collaborating in order to achieve a goal (Becker, 1996).

Faced with an extended period of time at home, we reflect on how our peer coaching relationship has enabled us to navigate COVID-19, sense making of our new normal in a spatially and temporally different environment. By weaving together our reflections we make sense of the importance of this relationship (Handforth and Taylor, 2016). Below we share our peer coaching conversation, started in the park (socially distanced), then developed over 48 hours of WhatsApp exchange. Lacey had also just secured a new leadership role, just like buying a new pair of shoes, was this a wise purchase?

Lacey – sent to Kerry in an email 22.12 pm May 18th 2020

Finding the space to read, write or even think at the moment is such a challenge, not just physically but emotionally too. It feels selfish to dedicate time to such matters as doctoral study when my daughters have become so much more dependent on me and my attention. 'Mummy, watch me play' my youngest cries from the bath as I sneak open my laptop to get down a few words. Feeling guilty I close the cover and quickly go up the stairs for more fun and games; my reflection will have to wait till later.

Today's meet up was a small oasis, in which to discuss, reflect and wrestle with the experiences of lockdown and the subsequent feelings that have emerged as a result.

Kerry – sent to Lacey in an email 9.18 am 19th May 2020

Two women in the sunshine, sitting in the park, drinking coffee, what could be more normal? But far from normal. As we move from a stay at home to a stay alert mode, as we sense make our new lives in the COVID-19 lockdown: this is more, much more. This felt illicit. I asked; was your partner okay with you coming out, leaving the children? We laughed. We checked ourselves. We are, we were, independent women. We

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paused. We reflected. Losses? Our selfishness. Our privilege. Guilt. More guilt.

We do natter, we do chatter, but this isn't waffle and witter (Lochhead, 1987). Our talk about family, domestic life, our hair; moves seamlessly to a reflection on the impact of the lockdown on our "self"; our leadership lives, our writing.

And in the midst of this natter and chatter, there is a space to be vulnerable and truthful, and to give and receive support and challenge. I do not ask "where are my gangs, my teams, my lost sisters?" (Clifton, 2015), because I know that you are there. I am not drowning, I am waving" (Smith, 1957).

WhatsApp dialogue between Kerry and Lacey 19th–20th May 2020

Kerry: When I then compared our reflections I was struck by the similarities of guilt, gender and identity. These are not new themes for our discussion, but has the current crisis made them worse?

Lacey: For me they are not worse, but I do feel like I am 'suspended'. Starting a new job in September, I am regularly thinking about the role I will leave and the new one I will start. It will be like trading in my comfy, well-worn shoes for a shiny, but slightly pinching new pair. I wonder what these new shoes will be like? I wonder if whether in amongst the danger of losing one's sense of self there is the potential opening up for finding a new one?

Kerry: Slowing down, noticing, turning space into reflection time is something you can do if you've not got lost. But it's hard. Is it harder for women?

Lacey: Where does your inner strength come from? Do you feel lost/ in a dangerous place? What's driving you?

Kerry: Perhaps my strength comes from reaching out? Reaching out is a source of giving me strength not a sign of my strength. That affirmation, or gentle challenge, that one gets from the girls/my networks. Perhaps it's not a position of strength but a position of need and vulnerability. I am stronger in a partnership because I am not on my own? I need the others? My strength then is acknowledging my weakness, my need for others? I am a team player. I want/need to be in a team. Reflecting, this year at work, I haven't had or been part of a team?

Lacey: I really liked your phrases 'I am stronger in a partnership' and 'my strength is acknowledging my weakness' – not typically associated strength. Particularly in school leadership. Would you agree?

Kerry: Absolutely. Brené Brown. Dare to Lead. Talks a lot about vulnerability as strength. We all have our vulnerabilities.

Lacey: Brings me back to the importance of this peer coaching relationship. I can be honest in this space.

Conclusion

We are both passionate advocates of the benefits of sharing, but this is more than that, it is a peer coaching relationship. This is not an expert and novice relationship, we are peers, both doctoral students, women, mothers and leaders in education. There is no hierarchy in the relationship, neither of us profess to know more. This is perhaps contrary to a typical critical friendship relationship, where the friend is an external expert skilled in using probing questions (Brighouse and Woods, 2013). The equality in the relationship enables us to say things, to be open in a non-judgemental safe space. It is okay to say and explore the too often unsaid. It's okay to acknowledge vulnerabilities both as doctoral students and leaders.

We value this shared, reflective space. We want to see it embedded in our doctoral and professional leadership lives – normalised. Peer coaching co-constructs a dialogue that enables us to dig deeper inside ourselves, developing our resilience. In education leadership, emotion and vulnerability are all too often side-lined, in favour of a 'never show you can't cope' culture (Sachs and Blackmore, 1998: 265). For us, peer coaching provides a space to resist the socially prescribed expectations of how men and women should lead: enabling us to challenge, through our discussion, gendered leadership constructs.

For Lacey, this has meant resisting the feelings of being seen as 'unprofessional' when her 3-year-old needs her during the senior leadership zoom meeting, and not apologising for this. For Kerry, this means prioritising the needs of her autistic daughter above the demands of her senior role, and not apologising for this. Through peer coaching we can share these feelings of vulnerability, we can negotiate together the expectations on us to constantly make ourselves more effective, the imperative to do more and be more, feelings of guilt or inadequacy if we do not. As a result of these conversation we are more authentic leaders and mentally stronger.

Through our peer coaching we have gained the strength to speak out and speak up, to acknowledge the truths of our current lives in this extraordinary time of a pandemic and how this threatens to undermine what women have achieved in the last 50 years. Observing that there has been a negligible number of submissions to many journals from women in the last month is no surprise to us. It draws attention to how women are more likely to be shouldering extra responsibilities at home during the COVID-19 lockdown, even in the most equitable of parenting arrangements (Goodson Kingo, 2020). We need to live our feminist principles, but we sense this is under strain. Our peer coaching relationship has given us insight and strength and has enabled our writing to continue. We can wonder out loud if we really should have got those new shoes, while also inspiring each other 'Why don't you write? Write!' (Cixous, 1976: 875).


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