

## **Principles of Peer Leadership: An Undergraduate Course for Students in Positions to Serve Fellow Students**

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### **Abstract**

Principles of Peer Leadership is an undergraduate course developed through the collaboration of leadership educators with colleagues from residence life and fraternity/sorority life to provide instruction to undergraduate students serving in peer leadership positions across campus. The course comprises online and recitation components to connect leadership concepts to the students' peer leadership practice. This application brief is intended to a) provide an overview of the course along with relevant scholarship used in its design, b) detail the course format and its various components for developing leadership skills, and c) offer educator reflections about how the course has worked well, and areas for improvement. Among the recommendations for future practice is a clear message of collaboration with university stakeholders and continuous assessment.

### **Introduction**

During the 2012 spring semester, faculty members, and colleagues from residence and fraternity/sorority life at Virginia Tech came together to identify the best ways to collaborate in teaching undergraduate students how to be peer leaders. The end result of the meeting was the development of an undergraduate course to teach resident assistants, teaching assistants, and student organization officers principles of leadership that may be used to motivate, mentor, and lead fellow undergraduate students.

The course was designed with two principles in mind. First, undergraduate peer leaders need an understanding of leadership concepts and an awareness of university resources to fulfill their roles in assisting the educational experiences of their peers. Second, given the nature of

organizations moving to a less hierarchical and more team-based structures, it is imperative that our students learn the concepts associated with motivating peers at the workplace.

The current iteration of the course offers a flipped-classroom design with leadership concepts being discussed online through forums and reflections, a recitation experience instructed by the peer leader's supervisor to gain hands-on leadership experiences, and a recitation meeting to connect online learning to practical experiences serving as a peer leader. The learning goals of the course specifically were to: 1) To enable students to serve as representatives of Virginia Tech with effective strategies and knowledge of campus resources to motivate peers to collaborate, build community, and grow as an individual; 2) To expand students' knowledge of leadership as a function of tasks and relationships performed as a team of peers working towards a common goal; and 3) To prepare students to be peer leaders with the skills to promote leadership and personal growth and success of fellow students at Virginia Tech.

### **Relevant Scholarship**

In developing the Principles of Peer Leadership course, the two primary areas of scholarship considered were theoretical frameworks that provided a strong foundation for the unique design of the course format, and approaches to leadership study relevant to co-curricular peer leadership roles. In determining these areas of scholarship, strong consideration was given to the work of educators focused on the interaction between the intellectual rigor of the curricular and the unavoidable influence of the co-curricular on college student development.

**Blending the Curricular and the Co-curricular.** Kuh (1991) presented a view of learning and personal development among college students that highlighted the importance of integrating co-curricular development into the intellectual rigor of the academy. Kuh defined learning as "the acquisition by students of any lasting knowledge or skill consistent with the educational purposes of the institution" (p. 6). A major influence on college student learning comes from student's intentional engagement in co-curricular activity.

Astin (1984/1999) explained that co-curricular involvement makes a positive contribution to not only the overall college experience, but also in the classroom as a critical element in student learning. In a review of his research on student involvement, Astin (1996) noted that student leaders learn through interactions with peers, often providing a positive impact that rivals classroom learning experiences. Exploring learning through interaction is also important to understanding the importance of a peer leadership course.

**Learning through Interaction.** Throughout the college student development literature, there are references to peers as a positive influence on students' collegiate learning. Kuh (1991, 1995; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) wrote about students learning through interactions with peers in leadership roles as well as from their own student leadership experiences. Students interviewed as part of Kuh's (1991) study used words such as "intelligent," "enthusiastic," and "supportive" to describe interactions with peers, offering examples like having out-of-class, scholarly discussion and debates that led to learning from and with peers (p. 192). It is important to note that students influence their peers in co-curricular collegiate environments. In addition to the literature on college student development, much of the research in educational psychology is centered on the idea that learning happens through social interaction.

Vygotsky (1978) introduced the importance of culture and history in a person's learning and development, claiming that through interaction, a person was not only introduced to a new idea that they would process cognitively, but learned because of the social interaction. His zone of proximal development indicates that learning precedes development and a learner can only reach their potential "in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 78). Vygotsky's assertion that learning not only increases from, but requires interaction with a more knowledgeable other has been a catalyst for an abundance of educational strategies that includes current trends like problem-based and collaborative learning. For a peer leadership course that includes an experiential component, it is important to consider scholarship that indicates effective methods for helping students reflect on the content and developed skills together, in team-based online forums and recitation classes led by an instructor, to learn how to be more effective as a peer leader.

**Design for Learning through Content and Experience.** Experiential learning helps a person develop adaptive abilities "to experience, observe, conceptualize, and experiment" (Kolb, 1981, p. 248). The relationship between learning and development among college students is related to the environments and learning styles each student experiences (Kolb, 1984). Following Kolb's (1984) model, prompting student learning through experience is an effective approach to course design. The model indicates that learning occurs in a four-stage cycle, with each stage (or "step") providing a foundation for the next. The stages are: Concrete experience (full sensory engagement in a learning experience), reflective observation (contemplation of the learning experience), abstract conceptualization (intellectual conclusions of the learning experience through analysis of new ideas and observations), and active experimentation (incorporating new ideas into a plan for an improved concrete experience). This process requires learners to move between and among the dimensions of conceptualizing experiences and reflecting on applied knowledge, which leads to an understanding (and development) of learning strategies that best fit students' situations and abilities. This understanding of learning as a cognitive process is a self-driven process that must be supported by effective course design.

Given these theoretical underpinnings, the challenge in developing this course was to deliver content to support students' development of a metacognitive awareness that leads to their ability to apply knowledge successfully in their peer leadership experiences. For this type of course design, the content must include declarative knowledge (i.e. a consciousness of "stored data in long-term memory") and procedural knowledge (i.e. grasping the concept of processes and understanding systems – maybe better represented as skills; Kluwe, 1982, p. 203). Further, a

course integrating knowledge directly contributing to application of knowledge must introduce relevant information which leads to knowing when and how to apply declarative and procedural knowledge experientially, or conditional knowledge (Garner, 1990).

**Learning from Peers in Leadership Roles.** Learning from peers in leadership roles is commonly seen within leadership education scholarship. For example, Jenkins (2012) conducted a study to discover the most commonly used instructional strategies in undergraduate leadership education. He found that discussion was most frequently identified as a classroom strategy, both in the form of interactive lecture (i.e. with the instructor) and even more prominently, among students (i.e., heavily involving peers). Other frequently used instructional strategies include reflective journaling and completing self-assessments (Jenkins, 2012). Odom, Ho, and Moore (2015) furthered this investigation through a qualitative exploration of undergraduate leadership teaching assistants perceptions of pedagogy used to teach leadership. Realizing the uniqueness of this group of learners, they discovered that these peer leaders were able to achieve essential learning outcomes related to leadership from completing their service to fellow students, albeit at lower levels of cognition (Odom et al., 2015). Perhaps the combination of these two learning environments into a course could enhance the learning of leadership competencies at higher levels of cognition.

Social interaction is not only relevant to instructional design, but also crucial to individual's learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, Dugan, Fath, Howes, Lavelle, and Pol (2013) found that leader efficacy in college women in S.T.E.M. fields was higher when they felt a sense of belonging (i.e. involved in quality interactions with faculty and peers) and participated in sociocultural conversations with peers. Examining how students in a leadership course perceive instructional methods Odom (2015) indicated that a positive environment for discussion may prompt students to share more during class, which provided opportunities for learning from others. Given the uniqueness of the position serving as an undergraduate peer leader, there may be opportunities for these students to learn with and from each other in a leadership course designed to facilitate this learning process.

The literature serving as a foundation for a peer leadership course is variable and informative. There is evidence that blending curricular with co-curricular leads to deeper learning, in particular through experiential learning opportunities. There is also evidence that social interaction, with faculty and peers, is critical to cognitive, and overall college student development.

## **Description of the Practice**

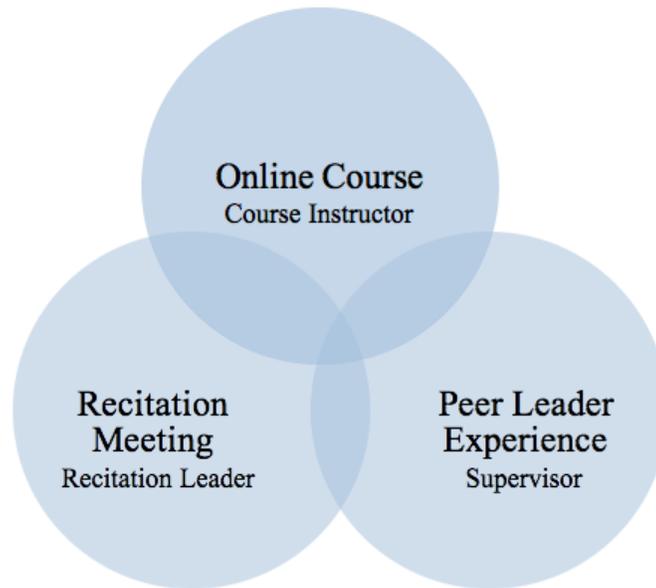
After realizing that many departments across the university were training peer leaders, with varying strategies and levels of success across campus, the Principles of Peer Leadership course, was created to combine resources and support peer leaders through the leadership studies discipline. Principles of Peer Leadership asks students to “examine theories and basic principles associated with being a positive influence on fellow students and develop skills utilized to motivate peers in teamwork-based scenarios.” Peer leaders meet the learning goals of the course through online learning, forum discussions, and submitting personal reflections regarding the progress made on achievement towards personally identified leadership goals. The culminating

course assignment involves teams of students exhibiting a poster session connecting leadership practices to the essays from the website, ThisIBelieve.org.

With the course being open to any student at Virginia Tech and gaining popularity, we found it necessary to define the peer leader whom may be most suitable for enrollment. For the purpose of this class, we consider peer leaders to be those college students who have a position of influence over a fellow student of equal academic status and abilities. The word *position* is not to be interpreted as only those students having an official title. However, the word *position* does indicate a sense of responsibility to fellow students and accountability to a university supervisor. So for this class, peer leaders may be, but not limited to, resident assistants, teaching assistants, organization leaders, and athletes.

Connecting the relevant literature to the course design, Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning provides the overarching structure. The recitation experience serving as a peer leader offers a concrete experience under the direction of a Virginia Tech supervisor providing performance feedback. Peer leaders have opportunities to reflect through forums and papers and gain insight through online lessons providing leadership content. The leadership practices and skills are presented with the two textbooks, *Students Helping Students* and the *Student Leadership Challenge*. Peer leaders work with Virginia Tech supervisors to set personal leadership goals and meet weekly to discuss progress on improving performance in their leadership position. Finally, these undergraduate peer leaders are set up for another peer leadership concrete experience to continue the cycle.

**Three Components of the Course.** In order to fully encapsulate the peer leader's experience in the course, Principles of Peer Leadership is organized into three parts (see Figure 1). The first part of Principles of Peer Leadership is a synchronous online component. Using the university's online learning management system, students go through a series of lessons each week accompanied with course readings, quizzes, and structured forum posts. Within these assignments, students apply leadership concepts discussed in the course textbooks to their peer leader experience. Student reflections, self-evaluations, and papers are administered throughout the semester in an effort to capture leadership development over time. The reflection assignment questions and rubrics are adapted largely from the DEAL model (Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning; Ash & Clayton, 2009). Elements of information literacy are also woven throughout the forum posts and course assignments which is assessed using an adapted section of the VALUE rubric developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Quality Matters (2014) rubrics were used in development of the online component of the course to aid in consistency and flow of the course. The online component of the course accounts for 55% of the final grade, albeit nearly all assignments turned in online ask students to integrate the three components of the course.



*Figure 1.* Key players and components of the course.

The second part of the course is the peer leader experience and includes the responsibilities associated with the required leadership position on campus, which is directed by the student's supervisor. Supervisors must be affiliated with the university either as a faculty member, staff personnel, or connected as an organization advisor of a student organization recognized by the university. Students meet regularly with their supervisors to discuss the leadership activities to be accomplished in the following weeks. The course requires supervisors to evaluate the performance of the peer leaders through the use of a rubric and reflective questions and students to evaluate their own performance. The recitation experience accounts for 15% of the course as evidenced through the performance evaluations. We intentionally incorporated this part of the class with online assignments and group discussions to provide opportunities to share the diversity of experiences in different roles of peer leadership across different settings. Students may retain some declarative knowledge about leadership, but through online forum discussions and in-person interactions, students from a wide variety of unique peer leadership experiences learn procedural and conditional knowledge from each other.

The third part of the course is the recitation, a one-hour weekly meeting with students from a similar peer leadership roles facilitated by a university employee. For example, students who are resident advisors meet with a housing and residence life professional staff member. The recitation leader facilitates activities and conversations that foster context specific connections between the peer leader experience and leadership concepts students learned from their assigned readings. This component of the course also includes assignments set by the recitation leader and development of the poster to be presented in the culminating poster session. These assignments account for 30% of the final grade. To provide more clarity on these three components to students and university supervisors, a robust recitation handbook and series of lesson plans were developed in collaboration with the course instructor and university professionals in student affairs to provide consistency, guidance, and accountability for recitation leaders.

**Selecting Relevant Texts.** The two text books used in the course were selected with three criteria in mind: application of relevant content, skills development, and a format that encourages peer leaders to apply conceptual learning to peer leadership experiences. The first text, *The Student Leadership Challenge: Five Practices for Becoming an Exemplary Leader*, is designed to help students see formal and informal leadership as a process of making significant contributions in both their own and others' development (Kouzes & Posner, 20014). The book presents leadership as a process of development, reflective, and cognitive, supporting the design of the course. In addition, the content is presented as a guide or collection of recommendations, allowing students to make their own metacognitive decisions as to its relevance and application. The second text, *Students Helping Students*, is as much a how-to manual as it is a resource for student leaders (Newton & Ender, 2000). The skills presented in the text provide concrete ideas for student leaders while the foundation of the content is offered in a reflective format for students to draw conclusions about what it means to lead peers.

### **Discussion of Outcomes**

The course tends to enroll approximately 165 students in the fall and 30 students in the spring semesters, which is largely based on the number of university supervisors requiring their peer leaders to complete the course. Many students find value in the course and are able to make connections between leadership concepts learned online with their leadership experiences through their recitation meetings. Student evaluations of the course suggest that nearly all peer leaders exceedingly enjoy their recitation meetings to the degree that the online component seems to be tedious to their learning. While great efforts have been made to make three components of the course more congruent, some students still struggle to see the integration of all three components to their learning. Despite this, Virginia Tech faculty, residence life staff, and student organization advisors greatly value the course for developing the leadership skills needed by their peer leaders.

For most of the peer leaders enrolled in the course, this is their first undergraduate course in leadership. While considerable effort in the lessons is placed on describing leadership as a process and practice of skills, many students still view leadership as a position, possibly because they are enrolled in the course as a requirement of their leadership position. As a result, we have received some feedback from students who felt that their final course grade was a direct reflection of their peer leadership abilities, instead of perceiving their grade as a measure of learning about leadership.

After this realization, additional framing and focus on course assessment was required to reiterate the purpose of the course with reminders on how assessments are based on a student's ability to reflect, apply, and discuss their peer leadership experience alongside leadership concepts. Still, the course is attractive to many students wanting to develop their leadership skills, and has begun to be an entryway towards the Virginia Tech's leadership minor.

### **Reflections of the Practitioner**

In effort to focus on continual improvement of the course, there is a need to improve assessment on students' learning of leadership; both after completion of the course and

longitudinally. There is anecdotal evidence from visiting with peer leaders that many leadership concepts learned were realized one or two semesters after completing the course. Assessing leadership learned several semesters after completion of the course may provide insight to improving lessons in the course.

During the first few semesters of teaching the course, we used the Gallup StrengthsFinder as a tool to help peer leaders better understand their talents and learn to apply those talents through goal setting and reflection. While we believe the Gallup StrengthsFinder to be a solid instrument, we have found the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) to fit the course better by keeping a common language for discussing leadership in all three components of the course. Additionally, it became easier to incorporate the SLPI into the course with codes for students to complete the instrument in the required course text, *The Student Leadership Challenge*.

Finally, it is sometimes difficult managing the various types of recitation experiences a peer leader may have and conforming these experiences to the structure of the course. Further, more work is still needed to create a common language of terms and provide more resources to university supervisors to facilitate recitations meetings to prevent confusion among supervisors and students. While lessons have been provided to help university supervisors facilitate recitation meetings with peer leaders to make connections between leadership concepts and leadership practice, it is not fully known to what degree supervisors are utilizing these lessons. To that end, it has been helpful to have lessons for the recitation meeting scheduled a week after content was discussed online to stimulate students to ask questions about leadership. All of these points present opportunities for research to better understand the educational needs of peer leaders to improve the development of their leadership skills.

## **Recommendations**

Leadership educators wishing to develop a similar course should work collaboratively with university stakeholders in designing content and methods. University supervisors working with peer leaders at Virginia Tech do not receive extra pay or compensation for leading recitation meetings or supervising students. Therefore, these professionals must have complete buy-in for the course and dedication to the personal growth and development of peer leaders in order for the course to function.

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Matthew W. Grimes is nearing completion of a Doctorate in Learning Sciences and Technologies, with a concentration in Educational Psychology. He serves as an instructor for the Residential Leadership Living-learning Community and within the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education. In his previous position in housing and residence life, Matt assisted in the creation of the Principles of Peer leadership course.