

Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative

Prototyping Peer Learning Groups as a vehicle for connection and change



Introduction

50+20 is a global peer-based collaboratory designed to enable management educators, leadership developers and organisational leaders to innovate and transform their own organisations and offerings around the three key roles articulated in the 50+20 vision – to create a Community of Responsible Action.

As part of a 9 month Innovation Cohort, our cross-institutional group has been prototyping a new form of web-based collaborative learning. Initially the idea has been tested by a small group in the GRLI Innovation Cohort representing business, schools, other learning institutions, change consultancies and business practitioners.

This paper explains the concept of peer Learning Groups in this context, the principles behind it, how it works, what has been learned so far about the value of engaging in our Peer Learning Group prototypes, and serves as a means to attract interest from the wider community of the GRLI network of business schools, GRLI Ambassadors and business, with the ultimate objective of it becoming a viable tool for new ways of connecting and learning across educational and business boundaries.

Virtual Peer Learning Groups - the concept explained

Our proposal concerns the development of an innovative on-line learning environment, capable of inspiring and supporting a new generation to find their way into the future of business. This on-line platform supports like-minded and like hearted individuals (and groups) to find and connect with each other. Through the formation of 'virtual' peer learning groups people can engage with learning differently with the potential to learning together about business that better serves the needs of our world.

Our motivation for exploring peer learning on-line is a belief that in 21st century management education there IS much that needs to be learned that can indeed be experienced by a deep and open dialogue across boundaries of institutions.

To test the idea we invited people from diverse backgrounds – academics, business leaders, consultants, business students and others – to explore their current business challenges together using a peer learning approach using Google Hang Out, a free on-line video conferencing facility. During the prototyping phase one of the Cohort members provided light touch hosting to facilitate the Hang Out.

Out of this was identified a range of gaps in current learning approaches concerning management decisions that are truly good for society. We heard from participants that experience, experimentation and awareness of our global environment increasingly matters over traditional business theory.

We heard about what participants are trying to do differently in their business lives and the benefits this is having to their business and others too. Sense-making strategies were described that encourage leaders to seek out and be stimulated by different innovations that help raise awareness of what 'I don't know' and subsequently applying that learning with others in the business.

Good practice and experience of key events were also shared. Events that triggered shifts in people's views and opinions of business as a collaborative force for good. The management development that is taking place in new developing markets was reviewed and the increasing need to become better attuned to different cultural practice. Likewise actions that create enhanced value for the business and for others were shared. Young people and their motivations for developing other shared models of business was explored such as the use of Crowd Sourcing and collaborative business building.

What is a peer learning approach?

It has been described as an approach to facilitate change and learning, leading to meaningful action, in individuals, through their engagement in a peer-based learning process."

"Peering into the Future: an applied framework for learning together in organizations", Oasis School of Human Relations

Peer Learning groups provide a vehicle for on-going learning and development that encourages and enables people to work with their deeper questions by building relationships, providing effective challenge and thought leadership, supporting learning and sharing experiences of good practice.

In practice participants may want to hear feedback from others in the group about they have tried to do differently, and what is making life/business better for them and for others as a result. Thereby, the groups can strengthen incentives for positive behavior in competitive environments by providing a safe environment to reflect on decisions made in the past.

Peer learning starts from where you are, working with your questions, experiences, intentions and feelings. It requires a person to make a shift from traditional academic conceptual knowing, to engaging with others who are actively learning, whilst practising and prototyping. It is a way to integrate knowledge and application.

In a Peer Learning environment we each articulate and act out of our own value and beliefs. Peer Learning involves adopting a very different approach to conversations. People working as peers work from a basis of mutuality and challenge - which includes conflict and opposition as well as joint problem-solving. To be a true peer you must wear your expertise lightly and enter into the fullness of meeting on each occasion. You must beware of arriving 'knowing' what is needed, and remember that 'we make our reality together'. We each contribute something particular and distinctive; this is what makes it unique and unrepeatabe.

How did it work in our experience?

For the prototypes we have used freely available web-based tools: -

- Email to engage participants, exchange profile details and indicate areas of interest

- Doodle Poll and email to arrange mutually convenient times for the virtual peer learning group meetings.
- Google Hangout to hold the peer learning group meetings of 4 or 5 people (which we have found to be the most viable number).
- A good internet connection and video-enabled computer or laptop (we did not try iPads or other notebooks in our experiment).

To take this to the next level, we envisage the development of a web-based platform with the functionality to enable interested parties to register their details and areas of interest, find other participants, and schedule and run their own Hangouts.

Further developments would be determined by feedback from participants own experience and could include a blog, and access related resources such as case studies and academic papers.

Scenario 1. A Peer Learning Platform: How it could work.

The platform could be web-based.

- Users would register with their name, email, website, organisation, role, key areas of interest which could be tagged for searching, biography, publications etc. Similar profile data as LinkedIn.
- The user would frame a question that they want to explore, understand and engage in dialogue with others about.
- They would choose a date and time for a Hangout using an embedded calendar (consider timezones).
- They would then post their question and invite others who are interested to join their peer learning group on the date and time identified. They would need to specify what they need from others - practical experience, contributions to the thinking, interest in exploring etc.
- Interested parties would indicate their interest to Hangout on that specific date and time. The user would need to make a selection and confirm the participants. The maximum number we have tested for a viable hangout has been 4/5 people. It may also work with more with a different agreed structure.
- Guidance would be offered on how to get the best out of the Hangout.
- The first Hangout could be working out WHO we are and why we are interested, and whether we are the right group, and WHAT we are going to do together. If in agreement, the PLG determines the frequency of Hangouts, whether dialogue is confidential, and what if any recording is needed. If people drop out, a new invitation is sent to invite new members to an already established group.
- The site could feature areas showing what groups are active and the leading question they are working on, indicating whether it is a new group being formed or an established group.

Making virtual peer learning groups work in practice

Through our experiments we have discovered the usefulness of having a few basic 'rules of engagement': -

- It is helpful for all those in the group to contract and agree the purpose of their particular group i.e. all are interested in exploring the same subject area.

- Four or five people appears to be the optimum number for a peer learning group. This way, everyone can have enough 'air' time and if one person can't make a session, the other three or four can carry on.
- Each person is individually accountable for what they say and do.
- Groups are self-managing and will need to agree what levels of confidentiality are appropriate, which may depend on their individual organisational contexts. A simple rule of thumb would be keeping personally identifiable information confidential within the group.
- The group will need to determine how long it meets for a session and how frequently it needs to meet. We found that two hours was an effective use of time but some Hangouts were extended by agreement to three hours.
- We expected individuals to ensure they located themselves in a quiet place to avoid interruptions.
- Likewise it is useful to 'check out' any reflections on what you have heard or learned, and actions or commitments you are taking away at the end of the meeting.

How you can help?

We are reaching out to others to engage with this idea to help develop it further: -

- Other members of the Innovation Cohort and their contacts
- The GRLI network
- Business and other organisations
- Doctoral graduates working in this arena
- GRLI Student Ambassadors