Chapter 9: Building Online Communities to Support Women Creative Entrepreneurs During Lockdown

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and global lockdowns forced us all to spend more time online. This chapter compares in-person and online community building as a business support tool for women creative entrepreneurs. Four cycles of action research collected qualitative data and tested different iterations of a peer-coaching training programme, with two cycles held in person pre-pandemic and two held online peri-pandemic. Communities were created during the structured sessions and benefits are considered in the context of social capital generation. The affordability and accessibility of in-person and online support is also assessed. Results show online participants developed close bonds and rapport with their new community as quickly as participants at in-person sessions. These relationships were long lasting, with several groups continuing to meet months after the study ended. The peer-coaching training approach provided a low-cost option for business support and the move to online increased accessibility. Putnam's theory of bridging social capital explains why community building between diverse individuals is useful for entrepreneurs, as it introduces new perspectives and expands connections. Participants found underlying commonalities in their personal values and entrepreneurial experiences, which helped them build these connections. This study presents a comparison between the in-person and online sessions and proposes that online structured peer-coaching sessions can provide business support to women creative entrepreneurs by helping them increase their social capital.

Introduction

In March 2020, I was partway through a research project exploring the impact of teaching peer-coaching techniques to a group of women business owners. Peer-coaching in general is an under-researched area and research into the impact of peer-coaching on social capital creation for entrepreneurs is extremely limited. I hoped to understand the role peer coaching could play in supporting women creative entrepreneurs. Previous research has identified

women entrepreneurs as at risk of isolation, low income, and burnout (Dumas, 2001; Kariv, 2013), in addition to the threats of mental-health issues (Gross and Musgrave, 2017), exploitation (McRobbie, 2015) and lack of state support (McRobbie, 2016) experienced by many creative entrepreneurs. My past experience running a design studio and working as a business coach with creative SMEs mirrored many of these findings. I used voluntary-response sampling to recruit those who self-identified with this demographic. This included an intersection of freelancers, pre-launch founders and experienced business owners; people working within and aligned to creative industries; and those experiencing female societal pressures as outlined by Kariv (2013).

I initially ran in-person sessions offering iterations of a peer-coaching training programme. Two research cycles were complete: the first testing the structure and content of the sessions, and the second identifying the impacts of peer coaching and community building. With the arrival of the UK lockdown in spring 2020, the third and eventual fourth iterations moved online. While navigating the extreme anxiety of the situation, the change in delivery created an interesting comparison - how would the online peer coaching and community building compare to the in-person sessions? And could online peer coaching offer an affordable and accessible approach to business support for women creative entrepreneurs? The impact of multiple lockdowns, social distancing, and changes in public behaviour has created additional issues for this demographic. Analysis is still emerging; Xu and Jia's work found that Covid-19 significantly decreased Chinese entrepreneur's personal wellbeing (2022), and approximately 75% of UK entrepreneurs have reported a loss in trading (Ute, 2021). Entrepreneurs in the creative industries have suffered from the cancellation of live events, closure of cultural venues, the narrow focus of government support packages, and additional mental health problems (Khlystova, 2021). The Office for National Statistics has released data highlighting the concerning repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic on women's wellbeing, mental health, and their additional time spent on unpaid childcare and household work (2021). Therefore, any approach that can provide accessible and affordable business support for women creative entrepreneurs is highly desirable. Additionally, the pandemic has increased our reliance on digital technology (McKinsey, 2020), so it is sensible to explore the impact of online business support on entrepreneurs' social capital.

In this chapter, peer coaching is defined as a group of two or three participants supporting each other through dialogue. This format helps them each work through challenges and commit to a course of action. The group participants take turns to fulfil the role of coach and coachee (and

the role of observer in groups of three), and they work in the same groups every session. The peer-coaching training programme in this study contains a series of sessions. Each session includes workshop-style taught content on a coaching or communication tool or theory; peer-coaching practice in groups of three; and whole group discussions and reflections. The in-person and online sessions followed similar formats.

The study used an action research approach to run four sequential research cycles between October 2019 and August 2020 to 57 total participants. Each cycle ran an iteration of the peer-coaching training programme and collected qualitative data through participant interviews, surveys, session transcriptions, and personal field notes.

The findings suggest participants at the in-person and online sessions had similar experiences. All developed close relationships with the other members of their groups, and analysis suggests this form of community building built social capital. The structured format of the sessions supported their personal development as business leaders and helped them communicate. There was no noticeable difference in results between the in-person and online sessions. However, the online sessions delivered an additional benefit, as they could also be accessed by a wider and more diverse audience.

Literature Review

Women Creative Entrepreneurs

The original study explored the community support needed by enterprising women due to the societal impacts of gendered expectations. Gendered societal or familial expectations may dictate women's time available for personal development and the type of support they require (Dumas, 2001; Kariv, 2013; Sweetman and Pearson, 2018). Research by De Simone shows the pandemic has increased the family and entrepreneurial demands made on women entrepreneurs. This increase further reduced their time available for personal development and the likelihood of their entrepreneurial success (2021). Dumas explains that business support tailored to skills acquisition, education, building self-confidence, accessing information, and challenging entrepreneurial gender stereotypes are most important for developing women entrepreneurs (2001). Kariv builds on this list, suggesting that tools to support professional networking, mental health, work/life balance, a propencity to internalise failure, and loneliness are also needed (2013). From personal experience, I recognise many of these issues and

believe peer coaching and community building could be a partial solution. This belief led to the creation of the study. My work draws from an intersectional feminist perspective, where societal expectations of sex, ethnicity, and gender are not considered in isolation and are seen as overlapping and having significant impacts on individuals (DeFelice and Diller, 2019). Therefore, my work uses language informed by the social construct of gender instead of the biological construct of sex. Anyone experiencing female societal pressures was welcome at the sessions.

Coaching and Peer Coaching

Coaching can take many different forms and is widely used in various situations to support individuals and teams. Professional coaching uses dialogue to facilitate learning and encourage goal-focused action. It is typically delivered one-to-one or with small teams by a professional and accredited coach. Research by Thomas, McDonagh and Canning demonstrates the value of professional coaching for supporting creative entrepreneurs (2014), although the financial investment needed to pay for professional coaching can be a barrier to access. Peer coaching is a low-cost approach reciprocally delivered by trained peers. It is widely and successfully used during nurse and teacher training (Badowski, 2019; Hohensee and Lewis, 2019). The evidence base for peer coaching is less rigorous than other coaching approaches. However, it is widely agreed to be low cost, easy to implement, and when conducted appropriately, can reduce participant's stress levels, build self-confidence, develop interpersonal relationships, and create a sense of community (Badowski, 2019; Chen, 2017; Hagen, Bialek and Peterson, 2017; Parker, Kram and Hall, 2014; Prince, Snowden and Matthews 2010). Unlike professional coaching, peer coaching also offers participants reciprocal and reflexive learning opportunities and the possibility of building peer support networks (Parker, 2014; Prince, 2010). Kutzhanova, Lyons and Lichtenstein propose peer coaching as a tool for developing entrepreneurial skills through group learning (2009). I agree with this perspective, but believe the benefits of peer coaching for entrepreneurs exceed skill development and can also build social capital. Therefore, I propose peer coaching can be a potential low-cost tool to provide business support and create social capital for women creative entrepreneurs.

Community Building and Social Capital

With women entrepreneurs identified as a group who need specific business support, and peer coaching identified as a potential tool for delivering this, I next sought to understand the value of networks and social capital for entrepreneurs. Evidence shows community building can provide entrepreneurs with emotional support (Kariv, 2013), access to finance (Todd, 2012), access to opportunities (Halpern, 2006), knowledge and resource sharing (Ebbers, 2014), feedback and ideation (St-Jean and Audet, 2012) and potential increased economic returns (Halpern, 2006). Kariv outlines how women especially receive pre- and post-startup benefits from supportive communities (2013). Communicating with others shares knowledge and develops our thinking by introducing us to new perspectives. If we consider communication as a "process of sharing meaning through the exchange of information" (Castells, 2012, p.5), we can appreciate the importance of community and networks in the social production of knowledge. Ideas on social capital developed by Portes (1998) and Putnam (2001) explore the benefits of altruism and generalised reciprocity that seem to align with peer coaching. For example, Putnam establishes the concept of bonding and bridging. Bonding is when strong social ties between members of homogeneous groups are strengthened, while bridging is when weak social ties between members of heterogeneous groups are formed (2001). He explains how these bridging ties may encourage social inclusion. From a peer-coaching perspective, I expected the new perspectives and expanded connections fostered during a peer-coaching session could support entrepreneurs. Kariv explains, "social capital is essential to the myriad resources and transactions that are critical in the early stages of the new venture process" (2013, p.203). As the business develops, the social capital provides access to resources and knowledge, which in turn, further increases business sustainability (Greve and Salaff, 2003). Even if we ignore the other benefits of peer coaching (reducing stress levels, etc.), it is a cost-effective high return on investment (Hagen, 2017) method of developing social capital for entrepreneurs.

Online Learning and Online Communities

The global lockdowns of 2020 significantly accelerated our adoption of digital technology (McKinsey, 2020) and encouraged an abundance of new activity in online learning and online communities. Many of us now use technology differently than we did in 2019, particularly in how we communicate and interact with others. As the sessions comprising my third and fourth research cycles moved online, an unexpected but interesting comparison between the in-person and online communities developed. Once a robust I.T. infrastructure is in place, online learning

can offer "accessibility, affordability [and] flexibility" (Dhawan, 2020, p.6). It is particularly well suited to adult education as the sessions can be scheduled around other commitments. Participants can be drawn from a wide geographical area (James and Thériault, 2021), offering increased information sharing and networking benefits (Wong, 2021). From a peer-coaching perspective, a more geographically diverse cohort can be recruited online, offering additional opportunities for generating bridging social capital. The digital transformation ensures most UK entrepreneurs have the means and ability to utilise this online support (Nambisan, 2019). However, this is not true of all demographics. Access to technology and user ability should first be considered before assuming online support will broaden accessibility.

Meurer notes that surprising little is known about how online communities create support for entrepreneurs. Their research into online community business support for entrepreneurs during the Covid-19 pandemic outlines how entrepreneurs, when experiencing specific issues, used online message boards to resolve, reframe, reflect and refocus their problems (2022). Similarly, research by Jang and Choi explored the social capital generated by online message-board users during the pandemic. They identify that sharing personal feelings and giving emotional support facilitates the formation of online communities. These can serve as a space providing emotional functions that are not met in other parts of user's lives (2020). This aligns with pre-pandemic research by Leovardis which makes similar findings when interviewing women entrepreneurs and 'mompreneurs' about online mother-entrepreneur support sites and social networks (2018). These studies differ from my work as interactions were generally reactive, user instigated and text based, with no external/facilitator influence. In contrast, my work explores if using a proactive approach with structure, a more diverse user group, video-based interactions, and teaching peer-coaching techniques can still create an online community, generate social capital and provide business support.

When deciding to move the peer-coaching sessions online, I read Chen's successful 2017 online support group. They effectively built a virtual community, developed resilience, and reduced burnout among participants. There were similarities between our approach and research aims, which suggested online sessions could be successful. Rapport-building exercises during the in-person workshops were developed in response to Kariv's work on women effectively reading non-verbal cues and facial expressions (2013, p.458). Therefore, with the move to online, it seemed video conferencing would be a suitable medium, as it offers interactivity, immediacy, and more opportunities for visual communication.

Methodology

Session Structure and Content

The original study into the benefits of peer coaching included a wider literature review and expert interviews, which informed the structure and contents of the sessions. A summary of the structure and contents is included here to aid understanding. Each session lasted approximately two hours and was delivered by an individual facilitator to a group of participants. During the first session, the participants were grouped into threes. They worked in the same groups during the practice parts of each session. This group size allows participants to alternate between the roles of coach, coachee, and observer, creating a reflexive learning environment. Timings and activities changed over the study, but most sessions followed the structure outlined in Table 1.

Approximate Timings	Activity
15 minutes	Welcome Session overview Group check in
40 minutes	Introduction to a coaching or communication tool, model, or theory *This part included taught content, group discussions, group exercises, and/or individual exercises, depending on the topic*
50 minutes	Divide into groups of three for peer-coaching practice: - 5 minutes: Contracting with each other, agreeing on initial roles and the session format - 15 minutes in the first role (coach, coachee or observer) - 15 minutes in the second role - 15 minutes in the third role, so all participants have performed all roles
15 minutes	Return to the main group Group reflection Opportunity to ask questions

Table 1: An overview of the structure behind most in-person and online sessions (280 words)

Research Philosophy, Design and Data Collection

The study began with a hypothesis informed by personal experience: women creative entrepreneurs find peer coaching and community building beneficial. I felt action research to be

a suitable approach, as it supports "hands-on research" (Quigley, 1997, p.38) and an iterative testing and development framework. Consequently, pragmatic philosophy is suited to action research, as it focuses on complex "real-world research" (Duram, 2010), and allows a choice of research methods unimpeded by theoretical constraints. Pragmatism does not seek an overarching 'truth', instead, studying human experience to understand the best solution for a given situation. This philosophy was well suited to the disruptive events of March 2020 that occurred in the middle of the study. Action research outlines a cyclical process where cycles of practical research are planned, conducted, analysed, and reflected on. In line with most other action research studies, I used multiple data sources to enable triangulation (Sagor, 2000). The study's small sample size limits the usefulness of quantitative data, so qualitative data was collected through participant questionnaires, interviews, session transcripts, and personal field notes. All participant data was anonymised, with personal identifiers separated from (coded) personal data.

- The first research cycle was delivered as three weekly in-person peer-coaching sessions to eight participants. Participants were creative founders and postgraduate students at Goldsmiths, University of London. This initial cycle tested the structure and content of the peer-coaching sessions and the impact on participants' sense of rapport with the group. Data was collected from participant baseline and evaluation questionnaires, follow-up semi-structured interviews with three participants, and field notes.

- The second research cycle was delivered as three weekly in-person peer-coaching sessions to 22 creative founders. This cycle tested the structure and content with a larger audience and identified what a third and more in-depth study should explore. Data collection methods included participant baseline and evaluation questionnaires, research field notes, and a participant semi-structured interview.

- The third research cycle moved online and delivered five weekly peer-coaching sessions to 17 participants. All participants were UK-based creative freelancers and entrepreneurs, recruited through social media and professional networks. The results of this cycle are compared against the earlier in-person sessions to understand if the same approach could work effectively online. Three participants were interviewed, and all participants completed weekly questionnaires, participated in a follow-up focus group, and completed a follow up questionnaire three months after the programme ended.

- The final research cycle delivered a stand-alone two-hour online peer-coaching session to 10 participants. This cycle explored the bridging social capital potential of online peer coaching. Therefore, I recruited participants from a wider range of geographic locations, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds. Participants provided feedback through baseline and evaluation questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Each research cycle produced qualitative data, which was analysed to uncover the story it reveals (Sagor, 2000) and to determine if further research cycles were necessary. After the peer-coaching sessions had finished, each cycle included a reflection stage. During this stage, the data was collated and analysed using a three-level coding approach. First, a data-driven, inductive approach was used to read and annotate the data, creating potential codes and identifying meaning. Second, the literature review and the cycle's aims and objectives generated codes. These were used during a second deductive theory-driven reading. Third, codes and data were read together, enabling identification and interpretation of wider patterns and context. As Quigley recommends (1997), I discussed the findings and analysis with peers. This iterative approach meant the analysis informed the next research cycle and helped identify the study completion after four research cycles.

Findings and Discussion

A Structured Approach To Community Building

Unlike the organic, open community described by Jang and Choi (2020) and Meurer (2022), this study created closed communities who were supported with structured sessions and taught content. My past experiences at networking events taught me that trust and honesty are difficult to forge in a room of strangers, particularly when those strangers are also running businesses and may be in competition. Lencioni describes this issue in his work on building teams, explaining how trust is the essential first step beyond which a group of people is unlikely to create anything meaningful (2002). The lack of trust was a concern, so the first session of each cycle included rapport-building exercises and active listening practice. Other topics covered in the sessions include reflective writing, goal setting, the GROW coaching questions model

(Alexander, 2006), and understanding personal values. Participant quotes include, "This coaching has helped me to help myself and others unpick things so they're not so scary", "It's made me think about myself way more, be more reflective about how, what, and why I do. It's made me think about how to support others to find their own answers", "I found it really inspiring to talk to other creatives in this sort of way", and "You sit down with people you don't know, and by actively listening you realise the person in front of you is going through exactly the same stuff." These comments highlight the reciprocal nature of peer coaching (Parker, 2014) and suggest significant benefits are attained through structured conversations with others. These findings build on Thomas' work (2014) to suggest creative entrepreneurs not only benefit from professional coaching but also peer coaching. Participants described their continued use of communication tools such as active listening and using open questions outside of the training sessions. One described how she adapted an exercise into a game for her children. These tools easily became embedded in the entrepreneurs' lives, impacting their wider community in addition to the communities built by the study. Despite my concerns, competition did not arise as a barrier to trust. Participants remarked that listening to others and showing empathy helped them notice their similarities. In turn, this developed their self awareness and encouraged individuals to show themselves the same compassion they showed other members of their group. Therefore, a structure that offers a form of communication training (such as peer-coaching techniques), structured conversations (such as peer-coaching practice), and a space for reflection and asking questions (such as a follow-up group discussion) is a potential way to build a community of entrepreneurs.

Comparison Between Building In-Person and Online Communities

Despite never meeting in person, the participants of the online research cycles reported quickly building long-lasting cohesive communities. My approach to measuring and analysing group cohesiveness developed over the study, as this is easier to observe in person. Field notes from the first two research cycles record intimate body language such as leaning in, mimicry, smiling, and sustained eye contact increasing as the sessions progressed. Collective habits such as sitting in the same positions and speaking with the same people also developed, suggesting developing rapport. Comments on the evaluation questionnaires echoed my field notes. These behaviours were harder to observe online, so results rely on participant comments. One participant in the third cycle remarked, "It's amazing that despite three strangers coming

together and talking…, how quickly we were really open with one another. I was surprised, especially through a screen." Other participants in both online research cycles made similar comments. This feedback suggests the shift to online delivery did not impact community building, although the influence of lockdown and Covid-19 placed significant additional pressures on participants. This result aligns with pre- and peri-pandemic research on the success of digital communities (Chen, 2017; Jang and Choi, 2020, Meurer, 2022). Despite the abrupt change to online, the third research cycle was the most extensive. Participants completed follow-up questionnaires after each session and again three months after the training ended to understand the longevity of any impacts. These later surveys revealed that three of the seven peer-coaching groups continued to meet regularly online. They described the online community as an "anchor" and a "lifeline" during the UK lockdown. Deep collaborative relationships formed during both online research cycles, and two years later, some are still in place and bearing creative fruit. However, unlike the in-person groups, participants of the third and fourth research cycles only spoke to others during the structured practice sessions and whole group discussions. This encouraged online participants to form strong bonds with others in their practice group but not with the wider group. In contrast, in-person participants could also speak during unstructured times, such as before and after sessions and during breaks. This suggests online sessions can build small communities and long-lasting business and creative relationships, but the rapport between larger communities may be harder to establish.

Accessibility and Affordability

I hoped to understand if online peer coaching could offer an accessible and affordable approach to business support. Peer coaching is already regarded as an economically viable coaching approach (Hagen, 2017) and the move to online significantly increased accessibility. The removal of limits on room size and geographic location allowed more participants to attend. The third research cycle saw a wider spread of ages and experience levels than before, possibly due to not paying transport or refreshment costs (James and Thériault, 2021) and the flexibility to fit sessions around their other commitments (Dhawan, 2020). However, online accessibility relies on equal access to the internet. Unexpectedly, online sessions were as labour intensive as in-person sessions. The organisation and administration for the third research cycle was significant, as I first had to plan and create an effective online learning environment (Maltby and Mackie, 2016). Internet connectivity and reliability was a problem for everyone, causing

occaisional disruptions. These issues should be considered, and mitigation plans developed, before the study is repeated or scaled. Affordability did not change with the move to online, as compared to professional coaching, the sessions were already low cost to deliver. The online costs of a Zoom subscription, website hosting, and a facilitator's time, are balanced by the in-person costs of room hire, printing, and a comparable amount of the facilitator's time. Overall, the study suggests in-person and online peer coaching is an affordable approach to building communities and social capital for entrepreneurial women. Online peer coaching can also offer increased accessibility without forfeiting quality, providing the chosen population can reliably access the internet.

Group Diversity

Despite the diversity in geography, ethnicity, age, and educational background, participants identified similarities in their personal values and entrepreneurial experiences. The in-person nature of the first two research cycles meant participants shared many similarities, while the online third and fourth cycles encouraged participant diversity. Putnam's theory of bridging social capital (2001) explains why community building between diverse individuals is useful for entrepreneurs, as it introduces new perspectives and expands connections. This was seen in participant comments, such as, "If there is a safe environment created and a mutual understanding, I don't think it matters how similar or different the person is since we are going for the same goal of helping each other out" and "We started spotting similarities between ourselves, even if we might be quite different." The participants found underlying commonalities in the things that mattered to them and their experiences of being women creative entrepreneurs. These commonalities were enough to bridge their differences and develop rapport. The literature shows this type of community building creates social capital, which is beneficial for entrepreneurs at all stages of business (Greve and Salaff, 2003; Kariv, 2013). Notably, all four research cycles experienced a high drop-out rate. Across all four research cycles, between 10-50% of participants withdrew from the study (participant numbers stated in the methodology are those who completed the sessions). Therefore, this approach is not suitable for everyone and the benefits stated were only experienced by those who chose to continue attending. Further research is needed to understand the mechanisms and motivators affecting this population's participation. Overall, findings show the peer coaching sessions created social capital for the women creative entrepreneurs regardless of group diversity,

because participants seek out similarities and focus on common goals. Additionally, when the group was diverse, it facilitated generation of bridging social capital, which offers additional networking and development opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

The communities created using structured sessions and taught content during four action research cycles, delivered significant benefits for the participants. The activities practised during peer coaching sessions, such as active listening, practising self reflection, and sharing knowledge, began a reciprocal and reflexive process which helped form community bonds, support personal development, and build social capital. The in-person and online sessions held during this study delivered similar results, and both formats had low delivery costs. However, online sessions that used video conferencing software could reach a wider and more diverse audience, while achieving similar impacts. This suggests that online peer coaching and community building sessions are as beneficial as in-person sessions. Additionally, the online approach can offer affordable and accessible business support to women creative entrepreneurs.

Research limitations include the small sample sizes and the specific external situation created by the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. The comparison is between online sessions and an earlier in-person, pre-pandemic version of the study, instead of a control group. Participants who described the sessions as a "lifeline" may have experienced high anxiety levels and missed their regular in-person community support due to lockdown restrictions. If repeated again, Zoom fatique (Bailenson, 2021) and a return to 'normal' life could alter the results of the study. Further research could repeat and improve this study, potentially running concurrent online and offline sessions with larger sample sizes. It could also explore motivations for participants leaving or remaining in online business communities, if certain personality types are better suited to peer-coaching support, and how to use the online peer-coaching format to encourage community building among a larger community.

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