



# Peer Action Collective: How Woodcraft Folk Fosters Moral Courage through Transformative Learning Experiences

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In the early 20th century, Woodcraft Folk pioneered an innovative approach to cultivating peace, co-operation, and global citizenship through experiential learning. As a progressive alternative that emphasised the nurturing of critical thinking, conflict resolution, and social-emotional skills, its participatory model enabled children to learn about the practical application of peace principles via co-operative games, outdoor adventures, and democratic decision-making. By analysing the organisation's pedagogical approach and its recent Peer Action Collective (PAC) initiative, this article explores how experiential, co-operative education can foster moral courage, critical consciousness, and social responsibility among young people through transformative experiences. The study highlights the potential of youth-led initiatives in catalysing both individual transformation and collective change, while also addressing challenges and implications for transformative learning theory and practice.

## Introduction

The Woodcraft Folk, celebrating its centenary in 2025, originally emerged during a period of significant social and educational reform after the First World War as a progressive youth movement committed to peace, social justice, and environmental stewardship (Harper et al., 2016). Founded on the principles of co-operative education, international friendship, and experiential learning, as the movement developed, it drew inspiration from progressive educators like John Dewey (1933) and Maria Montessori (1992), who emphasised the importance of learning through direct experience and critical reflection. The organisation's distinctive approach combines outdoor education, democratic decision-making, and social action, creating spaces where young people can develop both practical skills and critical consciousness. This pedagogical framework has proven remarkably adaptable, enabling the movement to remain relevant while addressing contemporary challenges ranging from environmental crisis to social inequality.

At the heart of the Woodcraft Folk's pedagogy lies a profound belief in learning through doing, manifested most visibly in its camping programmes and co-operative activities that foster deep connections with both nature and the international community. These experiences

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serve as what transformative learning theorist Mezirow (2012) terms “disorienting dilemmas”, challenging participants’ existing worldviews and sparking critical reflection. Through collective problem-solving and decision-making, young people develop the psychosocial attitudes and skills necessary for promoting positive social change. *Woodies*, the participants in Woodcraft Folk’s activities, often benefit from “the emergence of a shared feeling called *communitas*, which is a deeply felt ... sense of belonging and community” (Buechner et al., 2020, p. 87). The movement’s emphasis on intergenerational learning, amity, and self-governance creates opportunities for young people to explore new roles and perspectives, while its commitment to co-operation over competition distinguishes it from many other youth development approaches.

As we mark the Woodcraft Folk’s centenary, it becomes crucial to examine how this historic movement continues to evolve and respond to contemporary challenges, particularly through more recent initiatives like the Peer Action Collective (PAC). This article explores how PAC exemplifies and extends Woodcraft Folk’s traditional approach to developing humanistic mindsets while addressing pressing social issues. Through analysis of PAC’s methodology and impact, we can better understand how structured youth development programmes might cultivate moral courage, critical consciousness, and social responsibility in young people. This examination holds particular relevance as we consider how to prepare our youth to address increasingly complex global challenges while maintaining the human connections and ethical frameworks necessary for sustainable social change.

Table 1: Emerging themes in PAC’s publicly released news articles and online posts in 2024 (PAC, n.d.)

| Higher order themes  | Second-order codes      | First-order codes/ relevant terms and phrases   |
|--|-------------------------|---|
| Youth engagement and empowerment                             | Youth empowerment       | Peer researchers, changemakers, youth-led, voice, social action, make a difference, take action, leadership |
|  | Research and action     | Peer research, interviews, surveys, social action projects, campaigns, workshops                            |
|  | Skills development      | Communication skills, confidence building, research skills, facilitation                                    |
| Social issues and relevant mitigation and prevention efforts | Violence prevention     | Youth violence, knife crime, anti-social behaviour, safer communities, reduce crime rates                   |
|  | Education               | School exclusions, alternative provision, attendance, discipline, support systems                           |
|  | Mental health           | Support, counselling, trauma, isolation, safe spaces, trusted adults  |
| Partnerships and influence                                   | Collaboration           | Teamwork, partnerships, networking, multi-agency approach   |
|  | Diversity and inclusion | LGBTQ+ issues, different backgrounds, cultural awareness  |
|  | Funding and support     | Youth Endowment Fund, #iwill Fund, Co-op, National Lottery Community Fund                                   |
| Community development  | Policy influence        | Frameworks, strategies, decision-making, amplifying youth voices  |
|  | Positive activities     | Youth clubs, sports, arts, engagement, safe spaces  |
|  | Community impact        | Local area, make change, improve lives, safer and fairer places, community activities                       |

## The PAC Model: Framework and Implementation

PAC operates through an integrated framework that combines research, action, and reflection in a cyclical process of learning and development. Young participants aged 10-25 engage in peer research projects that investigate pressing social issues in their communities, from

youth violence to mental health and discrimination (Woodcraft Folk, n.d.). This research process is deliberately structured to enable young people to develop their own questions and methodologies, supported by trained facilitators who help maintain ethical standards and rigour. The framework emphasises youth leadership and decision-making while providing necessary scaffolding for successful project implementation. Table 1 summarises the key themes that emerged from a content analysis of PAC's news releases and publicly available reports since its inception in 2024 (PAC, n.d.).

The implementation of PAC's model follows a graduated approach that commences with building research skills and critical awareness before moving into action planning and project execution. Peer Facilitators, trained in co-operative values and approaches, play a central role in supporting their peers through this process, creating safe spaces for difficult conversations, and helping to navigate complex ethical and social considerations. The collective nature of the work ensures that participants learn not only from their own experiences but also from each other's successes and challenges. Regular reflection sessions help participants integrate their learning and adjust their approaches based on emerging insights.

PAC's framework distinguishes itself through its emphasis on integrating personal development with social action, ensuring that individual growth contributes to collective change. Participants engage in projects that address real community needs while developing skills in research, leadership, and collaboration. The model's flexibility allows it to be adapted to different cultural contexts and community needs while maintaining its core principles of youth empowerment, research-orientation, and social responsibility. This adaptability has proven crucial for the programme's effectiveness across diverse settings and populations.

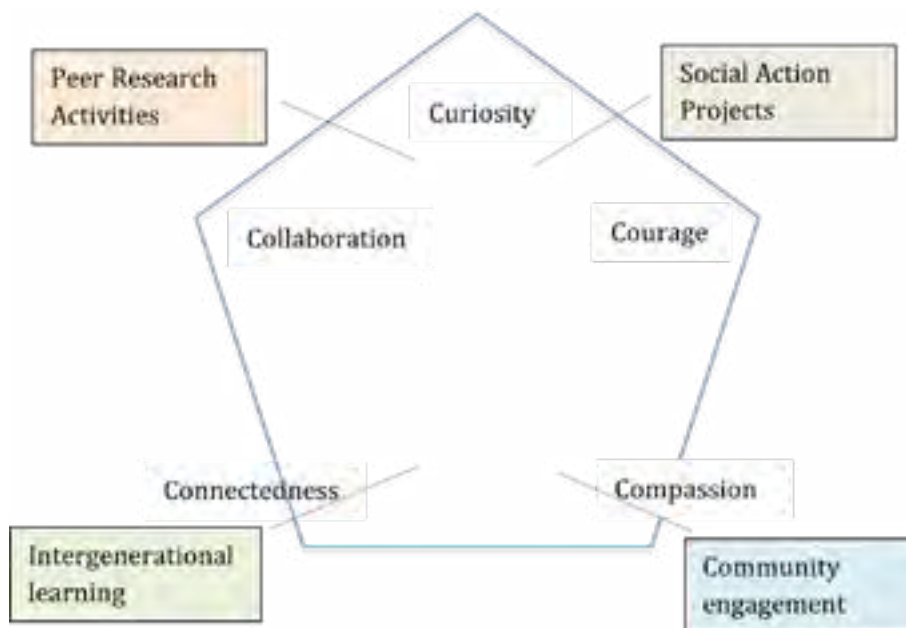
## **Developing Moral Courage through Transformative Learning Experiences**

Moral courage, recognised as one of the most important ingredients of leadership (Novogratz & McNulty, 2022), is defined as an "individual's capacity to overcome fear and stand up for his or her core values" (Lachman, 2007, p. 131). As early as the 1990s, Lucas (1994) emphasised the importance of the courage of conscious intention to successfully go through the transformative learning process that leads to reformulation of existing meaning perspectives. She noted that people lack courage because "they fear breaking away from the mass, being left out, ridiculed, rejected" (Lucas, 1994, p. 86). The development of moral courage within PAC occurs through a carefully structured process that creates opportunities for young people to confront challenging social issues while receiving appropriate support (see Figure 1). Through their research and action projects, participants encounter situations that prompt them to question existing assumptions and develop the courage to advocate for change. These experiences serve as transformative learning opportunities, pushing young people beyond their comfort zones while ensuring they have the necessary support to process and learn from these challenges (Mälkki & Green, 2014). The presence of peer support and mentoring relationships helps participants build confidence in their ability to take ethical stands and pursue meaningful change.

Fostering moral courage typically needs a supportive environment for taking informed risks and learning from both successes and failures. Participants in PAC work together to identify issues that require intervention, develop strategies for addressing these issues, and support each other through the challenges of implementing social action projects. This collective approach helps distribute the burden of risk-taking while creating opportunities for shared learning and mutual support. Moreover, the regular practice of group reflection enables participants to process their experiences and develop a humanistic mindset, which facilitates the pursuit of a life of purpose, inner meaning, and thriving (Gotsis & Grimani, 2024). As noted by Sekerka and Bagozzi (2007), "multiple points of self-reflection, self-evaluation and self-regulation that the individual faces along the way to action are like 'little mental acts' of moral courage throughout the decision-making path" (p. 145). In the future, this could allow young people to lead authentically in the workplace

by overcoming bureaucratic pressures to conform to the status quo, while understanding and accepting the professional and personal costs of doing so (Hannah et al., 2011).

Figure 1: PAC diamond for humanistic mindset development through transformative experiences



The intergenerational aspect of PAC's model adds another dimension to moral courage development by providing young people with access to diverse perspectives and experiences. Older participants and mentors share their experiences of ethical decision-making and social action, while younger participants bring fresh perspectives and new approaches to addressing social issues. Dialogues with distinct groups of stakeholders lead to the cultivation of critical consciousness, where PAC participants "come to understand, analyze, and take action against systems of oppression" (Seider et al., 2020, p. e451; also see Freire, 2000). This exchange creates rich opportunities for learning about different ways of understanding and adjudicating truth claims about various social and environmental problems.

## Challenges Moving Forward

Despite PAC's initial successes, several significant challenges and tensions warrant critical examination. The programme's goal of producing tangible outcomes through social action projects may sometimes create pressure that works against the deeper, more gradual process of personal and moral development. Reliance on grants and public funding could make young people feel compelled to demonstrate immediate impact through visible projects rather than focusing on the slower work of building understanding and developing authentic responses to social issues. Bradach et al. (2008) shows how a thrust to track progress and deliver results to funders in similar programmes could lead to burnout among volunteers. This tension between immediate results and long-term development requires careful consideration in programme design and implementation.

In addition, the structured nature of PAC's approach, though well-intentioned, could raise questions about the authenticity of personal development within programmatic frameworks. While the programme's structure provides necessary support and guidance, it may also constrain the organic development of moral courage and critical consciousness. The challenge lies in finding the right balance between providing structure and allowing for genuine personal growth. Conner and Strobel (2007) suggest that such programmes should try to validate and celebrate "different styles of leadership, allowing youth time to discover and develop their strengths and recognising and praising these strengths" (p. 295).

Questions also arise about the scalability of PAC's resource intensive approach and its accessibility to communities deemed "unappealing" in terms of making a significant difference. Specht and Courtney (1995) elaborate on how human cognition often functions to categorise some aid recipients as "worthy poor" and others as "less eligible" (p. 9) when it comes to impact work. Cultural considerations present another significant challenge, particularly as PAC seeks to work with increasingly diverse populations. The programme's approaches to social action and community engagement could reflect particular cultural assumptions that might not resonate equally across all communities. Scholars from Indigenous communities have previously lamented the preponderance of a Western-centric approach to impact work and called for "two-eyed seeing" integrating Indigenous knowledge and frameworks in social action that encourages culturally competent practice and decision-making (Martin et al., 2017). These issues require ongoing attention and innovation to ensure the programme can effectively serve diverse populations while maintaining its transformative potential.

## **Future Directions**

The future development of PAC offers rich opportunities for innovation in both research and practice, particularly through the integration of digital technologies and innovative approaches to impact assessment. The creation of digital platforms could enable greater collaboration across geographical boundaries while preserving the human connections essential to the programme's effectiveness. Longitudinal mixed methods methodologies for measuring impact could help capture both the immediate and long-term effects of participation while remaining true to the programme's transformative aims. These innovations need to be pursued thoughtfully to enhance rather than dilute the programme's core commitments to youth empowerment and social change.

Expanding PAC's reach while maintaining programme quality would require careful attention to both structural and pedagogical considerations. The development of participatory research networks could enable knowledge sharing across different sites while empowering youth as legitimate knowledge producers. Novel approaches to facilitator training and programme implementation using e-learning interfaces and artificial intelligence (Chen, 2023) could help address issues of scalability and accessibility. These developments should be balanced against the need to maintain the programme's effectiveness and transformative potential.

## **Conclusion**

As Woodcraft Folk marks its centenary, the Peer Action Collective demonstrates how traditional youth movements can adapt and evolve to meet contemporary challenges while maintaining their core values and principles. PAC's integration of research, action, and reflection offers a robust framework for developing moral courage and critical consciousness in young people. The programme's initial successes and challenges offer valuable insights into the broader field of youth development and social change.

The tensions and paradoxes identified through critical examination of PAC's approach suggest important considerations for the future development of youth programmes. Questions of authenticity, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness must inform ongoing programme development and implementation. The balance between structure and organic growth, immediate impact, and long-term development, requires careful attention, and continuous refinement.

Looking ahead, PAC's approach to developing moral courage through transformative learning experiences offers promising directions for preparing our youth to address complex global challenges. The programme's emphasis on integrating personal growth with social action, supported by intergenerational learning and peer facilitation, provides a model for growth and development that remains relevant in our rapidly changing world. As we face increasing

polarisation coupled with various social and environmental challenges, the importance of developing ethically courageous, critically aware, and action-oriented young people becomes ever more crucial.

## The Author

Dr Saheli Nath is an Associate Professor of Management in the College of Business at the University of Central Oklahoma, and a Board Member of B Academics. She is passionate about engaging students in transformative learning experiences that help them better understand the importance of responsibly leading and managing purpose-driven organisations. Her commitment to reimagining business education and fostering responsible leaders led her to the Woodcraft Folk, whose participatory approach to youth development offers valuable insights for cultivating ethically minded changemakers.

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