

MENTORING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role mentoring plays in supporting academics to meet the demands of academic researcher, teacher, and administrator. A focus group was convened of those who had a particular interest in mentoring and collaborative research to discuss what mentoring meant to them and how it could best be facilitated. It was concluded that an organisation can best meet its preferred outcomes by creating a climate in which informal mentoring can flourish, while simultaneously developing a safety net of formal mentoring to catch those who slip through the informal networks.

BACKGROUND

Mentoring is considered to have multiple benefits for the individuals involved in the relationship as well as for the organisation, but is also a means of developing knowledge. Knowledge production “depends on tapping the tacit and often highly subjective insights intuitions and hunches of individual employees and making those insights available for testing and use by the company as a whole . . . and from the employees identity with the enterprise and its mission” [10 p. 19]. Further, individuals together may “creat[e] . . . new level[s] of understanding . . . which they could not reach when acting independently [15 p. 184]. Mentoring can be seen to aid in this process. There is an historical precedence for mentoring, as far back as the Old Testament [6] and Greek mythology [4; 5]. Mentoring has generally been perceived in two key ways; as an hierarchical system [3], or more recently, as a ‘buddy’ system [3; 7; 9]. This paper examines, by way of a focus group, the meaning of mentoring to a group of academics from a Business School in a small Australian university.

METHOD

The researchers called for interested academics to attend a focus group on mentoring. A group discussion was selected over individual interviews, as such groups are said to provide ‘data on the *meanings* that lie behind . . . group assessments . . . yield data on the uncertainties, ambiguities, and *group processes* that lead to and underlie group assessments . . . [and can] also throw light on the *normative understandings* that groups draw upon to reach their collective judgements . . . [that is, they give] access . . . to group meanings, processes and norms [2 p. 4].’ Academics in the small focus group (8 persons) varied in position and experience. Some key questions raised during the discussion related to the meaning of the term, individuals’ experience of mentoring, key features of any relationships, and whether and how the relationship differed for teaching and research based mentoring relationships. The study was undertaken using participative action research techniques. This meant that the researchers here both facilitated the focus group, and participated in it as full members.

Action research/Participative action research/Action learning

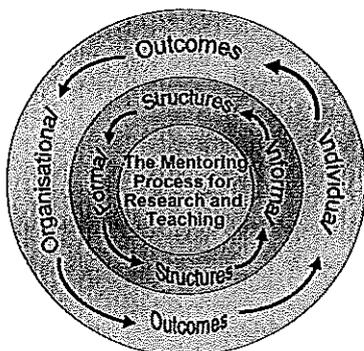
The action learning process is an iterative one of data gathering, feedback, reflection, action, and further data gathering [1113]. Here, the authors are consciously reflecting on their situation and that of the School, with an eye to changing the habits and practices of many years, of themselves and others, in order to meet the new demands and to help shape the old ‘teaching-only culture’ into the required

research culture of the new millennium. Participative action research is predicated on the assumption that no social research is value free, nor is the researcher outside the system being researched. The data from research comes out of the researcher's interactions with the researched system [1]. In this case both authors value education per se, and the pursuit of excellence in their craft, while being a part of a broader system that appears to count success in teaching in terms of the numbers of students who graduate in the minimum time, with little regard to the quality of their learning experience and success in research in terms of the quantity and type of research published. Thus we see the authors by basing some of their research on data generated within their own School and by interacting with their colleagues, trying to meet the demands of the overall system, while discovering, and relishing, the research and collaborative processes. Persons involved in action learning work on a 'live' project in real time. This is learning by doing, and involves bringing together theory, professional and organizational knowledge, and intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group dynamics. This is, in essence, an experiential model, and is not unlike the learning cycle model of Kolb [8].

RESULTS

On analysis of the transcript of the focus group, a concentric flow diagram for understanding the multiple meanings and uses of mentoring, as perceived by the participants, has been devised (See Figure 1 below). An analysis of the focus group data revealed four facets of meaning with each facet having contrasting dual positions. The facets are those of structuring, facilitation, intention or purpose and outcomes of mentoring. Structuring could be either formal or informal; facilitation could be either set by the organisation or by individuals; intention could be either research or teaching oriented, and outcomes could be organisational or individual.

FIGURE 1: The Mentoring: Process for Research and Teaching



Structuring of Mentoring Relationships: Formal/Informal

Formal mentoring is identified by the way in which it is set up, the objectives set, the perceived power relations between mentor and mentee and the time frame for completion of objectives. An illustrative example from the transcripts is 'Formal mentoring is the one set up by a company or institution with some objectives, with usually a finish date, and some things to come out [outcomes].' Informal mentoring is perceived by the focus group as being a natural development of relationships, a godparent/counsellor type relationship, but also one in which some are left out as they do not have the personal contacts to develop these types of relationships. Informal mentoring is also seen as having fluid start/end dates. 'Informal mentors covered the things that happened naturally so the godparent type of person, who was usually older and wiser, was called an informal mentor.' 'So it's two way, there is reciprocity' 'As a mentor I'm happy to work with people till they're ready to work on their own.' 'It's a big problem with an informal system in that some people feel left out.'

Intention of Mentoring: Research oriented/Teaching oriented

The interrelation between the two demands on academics is illustrated by the comments of the Educational Development Facilitator, whose role is to enhance good teaching in the School. An illustrative example from the transcripts is: ‘. . . I’ve put it on record that I thought my role was to help teachers in their prime function, and what our prime function became was research’. Others also expressed the dichotomy: ‘There is actually an issue here between teaching and research . . .’ Research intentions, it was noted by the focus group, needed to be characterised by a high degree of trust. ‘I think in research when you are working with other people there has to be a level of trust, which comes through in most mentoring discussions.’ Teaching was identified as the other intention of mentoring relationships. These mentoring relationships were perceived to be characterised by power relations, with individuals preparedness to open themselves and their classrooms up for criticism being paramount to the development of this relationship. ‘I’ve also been asked to do some official mentoring on a teaching basis and that’s quite different, that’s not as collegial. . . and however much I try to say it’s one colleague helping another, because I’ve been asked to do it it is a power thing.’

Outcomes of mentoring: Organisational/Individual

While the literature confirms the positive outcomes for the organisation of mentoring, the participants in this group focused on the individual outcomes. The authors have contributed to the literature in this area, with multi-authorship and supportive learning communities offered as means whereby the organisations goals of increased research output can be facilitated [9; 14; 14]. In the focus group there was a high level of enthusiasm about individual outcomes of mentoring. ‘I enjoyed it immensely, for a variety of reasons.’ ‘History will be the judge, but I’d like to think I learnt as much as I taught.’

Facilitation of mentoring: Organisational responsibility/individual responsibility

Who should be held responsible for setting the climate under which mentoring would flourish – the organisation or the individual? ‘From my own experience it is the environment; the (organisation). . .’ Some practical facilitations the organisation could support were then raised: *A ‘real’ tea room*. People missed the collegiality of the ‘old style’ tea room and felt it should be resurrected. *Informal colloquia*: a comparison was made between the colloquia experiences of the past, and the present day, the inference being that the organisation could facilitate a more open and trusting climate.

SUMMARY

The greatest level of enthusiasm was around informal research-based mentoring, where the facilitation was by individuals and the outcomes were personal. Many had not had strong organisationally-set mentoring relationships, but developed peer or collegial relationships in response to pressing needs, whether of research or teaching. Fear existed around teaching-oriented mentoring, particularly if it was formally structured by the organisation. Where teaching-based formal mentoring had been set up by the organisation there were issues of power relations affecting the relationship. Informal teaching-based mentoring in the classroom occurred rarely as it involved opening up oneself to criticism in front of one’s students, but was productive when it occurred. There was a greater level of equality in research-oriented mentoring compared to teaching-oriented mentoring. The analysis of the data concluded that an organisation can best meet its own outcomes, in this case greater research output and better teaching, by creating a climate in which informal mentoring can flourish, and at the same time creating a safety net of formal mentoring for those who slip through the informal networks. Questions now need to be asked about how to best accomplish these things in a climate of perceived relative un-ease, distrust and fear.

A full list of references is available from the authors on request.