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Reflecting upon the Present and Planning for the Future: A Collegial Mentoring Initiative

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Formal mentoring is employed to assist in the induction of staff to new professional roles or responsibilities. Particular people are designated as mentor and mentee and specific goals and procedures are agreed upon. The organisation involved is responsible for the selection and professional development of the mentors and evaluating the effectiveness of the process.

Peer relationships within organisations have been of significant value in providing career and personal support in organisations. Smith (1992) has described how the focus and effect of the peer relationship can vary according to people 's career stage and the level of trust between the participants.

While increasing attention is being given to the development of formal mentoring programs within organisations it is important that the nature and benefits of collegial mentoring across sectors be examined.

This paper presents the history of a collegial mentoring relationship between a school principal and a head of school. It shows how this across sector collegial or mutual mentoring has been successful in assisting the participants in learning from their everyday experiences while also planning for the future.

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History and overview of the mentoring experience

The two participants featured in this paper, Mark and John, were from two different educational institutions. Mark was a school principal and John was a head of school of education at a university. The across organisations collegial mentoring reported in this paper had its early origins in a series of meetings that the two participants had had during the first half of 1997. These meetings had been initiated by John so that he was able to maintain an understanding of school issues. The agenda was largely information regarding school and curriculum matters. Mark had appreciated the meetings because it provided him with an outsider point of view on matters he was addressing. There was no professional development agenda or goals for the meetings. While Mark and John, realised in retrospect, that they both had found the discussions informative, the meetings were not continued in the second half of the year. The meetings stopped without any formal agreement but more because each person thought there was a lack of energy around them and they were experiencing difficulties in finding mutually convenient times to meet.

The collegial mentoring experience which is the focus of this study formally began at the beginning of 1999. Mark indicated to John that as a result of his principal appraisal in 1998 he had discussed with his regional advisor the possibility of mentoring for his own professional development. John was keen to resume the meetings and saw the mentoring as being mutually beneficial. The mentoring sessions were scheduled for once a month. There was no defined structure for the individual sessions. The agenda for each session emerged when Mark and John met rather than being prearranged.

Data sources and analysis procedures

The major source of data was the written reports prepared by John after each session and presented to Mark at the beginning of the next session for checking the validity and comprehensiveness of the data. The reports contained the content of the discussions and a reflection upon themes that had emerged within the session or across a set of sessions. The content of the sessions was presented as an abridged report of the conversation indicating who spoke and the substance of the person's comments and questions.

The cumulative data were analysed by each person separately to identify key themes and data related to the three research questions. The data were then analysed by the two participants jointly. From these two analyses of the data, one separately and the other jointly, categories were developed for a quantitative analysis of the content of the meetings. The quantitative analysis of the data was used to map the content of the sessions over time and prepare a conceptual framework for describing the nature and benefits of the collegial mentoring experience.

Results

The reports of the sessions were analysed with respect to their structure, agenda and the qualities expressed in the discussions. A summary of the structure and agenda of the meetings is presented below (Table I). The qualities which characterised the mentoring experience are discussed later in the paper.

Structure

No structure had been pre-defined for the sessions. Five structural elements emerged across the different sessions. These elements included:

- presentation and checking of written summaries of each preceding meeting;
- creating personal conversational space;
- explicit attention to agenda;
- review of the mentoring experience; and
- working on set tasks.

The first three elements of presentation and checking of written summaries, creating personal conversational space and explicit attention to agenda, occurred in the majority of sessions. The reviews occurred in sessions four, eight and ten. The first of the reviews arose naturally during the fourth session, the second review was in the form of a formal review presented to postgraduate students studying collegial reflection and mentoring and the third review was in preparation for this paper. The last two reviews were focussed on set tasks which were orientated initially to external audiences but were also addressed in ways which would ensure they were beneficial to the two participants and the future mentoring experiences.

The written reports of sessions were prepared by John, who had seen them as a helpful tool for tracking the sessions for later reflection and analysis. While the reports had not been solicited by Mark he appreciated them and saw them as a tangible benefit of the mentoring experience.

Creating personal conversational space emerged as an important element of the mentoring sessions. This structure provided each participant with the personal space to move from one's immediate work agenda to focus more upon what was important for them at this time. It was an invitation to each other to indicate where one was at, touch base, catch up and to "chew the fat". The conversation was grounded in what each person was doing but was not constrained by the immediacy or pressure of any particular work agenda. The time allowed each person to move outside his own organisational boundaries and reconnect across institutions. The conversation was characterised by a duality with questions and comments from the other person in response to points that were made.

Explicit attention was then given to agenda or matters raised for the particular session. These matters could be related to one's own personal or professional agendas or to matters which one was responsible for in one's own organisation. The explicit attention to agenda

followed the creating of personal conversational space with the specific focus of the agenda being decided jointly by the two participants. The agenda was seen as being primarily to achieve the professional development goals of the mentoring more than the organisational agenda of either institution.

Session	Structure					Agendas
	Report of meeting	Creating personal conversational space	Explicit attention to agenda	Review of mentoring	Working on set task	
1						Professional agenda with a mutual commitment to mentoring.
2	•	•	•			Personal, professional and organisational for both participants.
3	•	•	•			Personal, professional and organisational for both participants Attention given to the different work contexts and their influence on each person and their colleagues.
4	•	•	•	• Mini-review		Personal, professional with less attention to the organisational. Highlighted the need to balance present and future responsibilities. Mentoring agenda balancing personal conversational space and explicit attention to professional and organisational agenda.
5	•	•	•			Organisational agenda with attention to technology, literacy and inclusiveness for the school students.
6	•	•	•			Personal and professional focussed more on Mark
7	•	•	•		•	Personal and professional agendas focussing upon each other's professional journey and future directions.
8	•	•	•	• Formal review	•	Substantive focus on the mentoring agenda with explicit attention being given to personal, professional and to a lesser extent the organisational agendas.
9	•	•	•			Review of the previous session then more attention to the organisational agenda of technology and learning.
10	•	•	•	• Formal review	•	Personal and professional agenda particularly for John then more attention to the organisational agenda of technology and learning. Mentoring agenda.

Table 1 Structure and agenda of each of the mentoring sessions

Agendas

The agenda was the substantive focus of the matters discussed during the particular mentoring session. Four types of agendas were identified from the analysis of the sessions. The agendas were personal, professional, organisational and mentoring. The first three agendas - personal, professional and organisational - formed the major set of substantive focus areas in the discussion. The fourth agenda, mentoring, was a separate category which indicated whether or not a focus of the discussion was on reviewing the mentoring experience itself.

Definitions and examples of each of the four agendas are presented below.

Personal agenda - matters concerned with the personal approach, well being and development of one of the participants .

Example :

John ...commented upon Anne's feedback that he had not been himself for about four weeks. She indicated that while others might see it she could. John had asked her about this and whether it was his responses to staff, his lack of humour or what. Anne commented upon the lack of humour and John's need for space.

Professional agenda

- matters concerned with the professional vision, development and career of one of the participants.

Example:

Mark was aware that the school was going well and the community and relationships aspects of the school were good.

John's vision was related to the school working integrally with its community so that there was a more holistic approach to the education and assisting children, parents and families.

Organisational agenda

- matters concerned with the goals or priorities of the organisation of which the participant(s) was a member.

Example :

The agenda of learning and technology raised by Mark was relevant to John because of its being an integral part of both the University's and Faculty's strategic plan for the coming years.

Mentoring agenda

- matters concerned with the goals and processes of the mentoring experience. This agenda stemmed from the attention given to reviewing the mentoring experience.

Example :

Mark indicated that we needed to give attention to both the present issues as well as a specific continuing focus. John reported that he saw both the journalling and reflection as helping him and people learn and develop. Mark commented that we needed to not just chew the fat but also have a thread. He asked what the thread would be because unless we formalised it we could lose something. John commented that their discussion reflected the tension between balancing their present and future responsibilities which they had reflected upon the previous meeting.

The number of sessions in which each of the types of agendas was identified is presented in Table 2. While the personal, professional and organisational agendas were present in 7 or 8 of the sessions an examination of the extent of the time within the sessions showed that less time was given to the organisational agenda than to the personal and professional agendas. This was particularly the case in sessions 4 and 8, where the organisational agenda was identified in the review process as an important area while it was not to dominate over the personal and professional agendas. The personal agenda was in most cases related to the how it impacted upon the professional approach or actions of the participant, though on several occasions more personal matters, such as personal loss and grief, were also discussed.

Type of agenda	Number of sessions
Personal	7
Professional	8
Organisational	7
Mentoring	3

Table 2 Type of agenda and number of sessions in which it was evident

The analysis of the agendas across the ten sessions showed that:

- the personal professional and organisational domains were legitimate domains of the mentoring experience;
- the professional agenda was a central focus of the mentoring experience;
- there needed to be organisational benefits from the mentoring experience;
- the conversation needed to easily reflect back to the personal and its relationship to the other agendas.

Qualities of the mentoring experience

Four qualities were identified through the reports of and reflections upon the mentoring sessions. These were mutual respect and trust, vitality, interconnectiveness, and thinking beyond current contexts and constraints. Each of these qualities will now be discussed.

The mutual respect and trust allowed the two participants in the mentoring experience to be open in the matters raised across the personal, professional and organisational agendas and in their reviewing of the mentoring experience itself. This openness was also evident in

their sharing of successes, failures and difficulties and the honesty of their feedback to each other. As each participant indicated in the review in session eight.

The good news ... in this was the understanding they had of each other, their spot on comments and their trust.

There was an equality and an ebb and flow. No one dominated. Just like talking. A real trust.

The vitality was expressed in the dynamism, commitment, enthusiasm and energy of the mentoring experience. While the meetings in 1997 had lacked this vitality and "spark" each participant in the current mentoring experience looked forward to the meetings. John had indicated during the sessions

that "at the beginning of the year he could not have anticipated how enriching it was nor how the agendas unfolded". Both people looked forward to the mentoring time and each session finished with a commitment to the next occasion they would meet.

The enthusiasm and energy went beyond the mentoring experience itself and impacted upon their responsibilities in their own organisations and the possibilities they discussed regarding their own professional journeys. Energy, enthusiasm and engagement were elements that Mark looked for in the students' learning and particularly in their use of technology. The dynamic nature of the mentoring experience gave Mark enthusiasm and energy for this organisational agenda.

The interconnectiveness of the mentoring experience was reflected in the way there was a meeting of their agendas, worlds, organisations and perspectives. The participants were both involved in education and had administrative responsibilities. They also found a close association in their agendas as they both needed to make a difference in the next two years to ensure that they were better prepared for the next stage of their professional lives.

As they discussed different issues principles emerged such as "the balancing of present and future agendas" which assisted each of them in their own contexts. There was also an ease in moving across the personal, professional and organisational agendas. John was "conscious that the personal and professional were always interacting. With Mark this was evident in his approach to paving the backyard with his need to be sure before he took the first step. With John it was in his commitment to the wider community."

The thinking beyond current contexts and constraints emerged during the early mentoring sessions. Both were committed to enhancing the learning and work environments within their own organisations. Mark wanted it to be "less of a struggle for the teachers" and wanted "to see the teaching/learning approaches being more engaging for everybody". John was also keen to see how attending to the questions of technology and learning could relate to this priority in his own situation.

Factors contributing to the successful outcomes of the mentoring experience

Some of the successful outcomes from this mentoring experience were the:

- sharing of insights;
- level of trust;
- empowering each other;
- focus on the future as well as the present;
- thinking beyond current practices and situations; and

- managing or reclaiming time and space better.

A number of factors were related to the achievement of these outcomes. Two of these factors were time and space. It was apparent to both people that the time was right for this mentoring experience. The "fallow year" of 1998 had given each of the two participants space to reflect on their own current situations and the potential benefits to be derived from their meeting regularly with a more specific focus when Mark suggested, early in 1999, that their meetings be resumed.

Space was also derived by the participants' freedom from their own organisational constraints as they were from different organisations. It was thought on reflection that if they were from the same organisation the organisational agenda could dominate and there would be less inclination to address some matters within the personal and professional agendas. Time and space was also provided through creating personal, conversational space at the beginning of most sessions.

The three main agendas, the personal, professional and organisational, had been legitimised during the meetings and each person knew that they could move into any of these domains or areas. There were also elements or events in the discussions which would take the focus back to the personal when this would illuminate what was happening in the professional or organisational domains.

The mutual respect and trust provided an ease and freedom for interacting with and referring to each other personal and professional agendas. Each person welcomed the other participant's comments and perspectives and knew that each person was willing to risk moving into the personal. There was also a welcoming of each other's gifts - Mark with his use of images and figurative language to express his insights and John's analytical thinking which identified principles involved or which needed to be considered. There was also a mutual understanding that while they raised personal agenda this was usually related to professional matters and that they both had other support networks in the personal domain.

While the organisational domain was not to dominate the mentoring agendas there was a commitment to there being organisational benefits. If this had not been the case the mentoring experience would have lost some of its energy. The regular reports of the mentoring sessions provided by John provided a history of the matters discussed and ideas that were raised.

Conclusion

Early in this collegial mentoring initiative a structure emerged which, through the creating of personal conversational space, emphasised the importance of having time for one's own professional development and reflecting upon one's own professional journey. Both participants found the mentoring experience a source of energy and enthusiasm as well providing them with a means of renewing, broadening and grounding their visions as educators.

The three domains, personal, professional and organisational, were integral to the subject matter of the sessions while there was no requirement that any of these domains had to have priority in any particular session. The participants' commitment was to ensuring that each person was responsive to where the other person was in his professional journey at that time. The concept of journey showed how being attentive to the present moment was as important as movement towards longer term goals.

The collegial mentoring relationship was characterised by deep trust, openness and a commitment to giving the time and space needed for the initiative. This trust and openness allowed each person to be ready to move from the professional or organisational agendas to the personal when that was found appropriate.

While the main focus has been upon the benefits to the participants there were also benefits for the organisations. These included the enhanced professional vision, energy and commitment of the staff member and a broader perspective in addressing the organisations' agenda, for example in the area of technology and learning. Collegial mentoring has the potential for being an effective professional development strategy for organisations which are characterised by flat career paths, and where people are seeking professional enrichment and opportunities to explore issues from a wider perspective.

Collegial mentoring has been found to be an effective tool for professional development. While the study has shown the benefits for the two participants and their organisations further research is needed to examine the individual and organisational benefits of other collegial mentoring initiatives. It is important to study at what stage in a person's professional journey collegial mentoring is most appropriate. Another research area is the ethical issue regarding the trust inherent in the mentoring experience and how it relates to the area of organisational confidentiality.

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