

JAN 02265 Decoding the mentoring experience: a conversation with Parker Palmer

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Abstract

"I think it would be awesome for everyone to be involved in a mentoring group. A lot of the time I don't think we needed 'guidance' but it was just great social interaction with people you would otherwise not have met" says one student in a University-wide First Year Initiative designed to assist students with the transition to University studies. Parker Palmer (1998, p. 21) describes mentoring as "a mutuality that requires more than meeting the right teacher; the teacher must meet the right student. In this encounter, not only are the qualities of the mentor revealed, but the qualities of the student are drawn out in a way that is equally revealing". In the Faculty of Education's 'pilot program' 54 students (25% of those enrolled in the Bachelor of Education, Primary) were randomly selected to participate. Mentoring groups consisted of six students who chose to meet volunteer staff mentors for six weeks. This paper is a reflection on the mentoring experience of one group that continued to meet regularly. The research question: What was it about the *group members* that allowed successful mentoring to happen? is addressed through a conversation with Parker's ideas, thereby decoding this rich mentoring experience.

Mentoring from an historical perspective

The term 'mentor' has a long history, going back to Homer's famous poem the *Odyssey*. When King Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War, his friend Mentor was trusted with the care of his son, Telemachus. During Odysseus' ten year absence Mentor was a stand-in for Odysseus, and had to "personify the kingly quality of wisdom" (Smith & Alred, 1994, p. 103). Although not a biblical word, mentoring appears to be a biblical concept, as Mallison (2002, p. 28) contends "Mentoring was a way of life in Bible times", and Lawrie explains.

There are stories of followers of God who took younger followers under their wing, providing counsel, challenging beliefs, demonstrating a lifestyle of faith. As each generation faced the challenges of discovering what it meant to be God's people, they benefited from the wisdom and experience of those who came before them. (Lawrie, 1998, p. 4)

In the Bible there are numerous examples of mentoring, such as the relationship of Barnabas to Paul, Paul to Titus, Elizabeth to Mary, Naomi to Ruth, Moses and Joshua, as well as David with Johnathon. The three examples below show that mentoring occurred in biblical times in a variety of ways. Ruth saw Naomi as a person who she wished to model her life on.

Where you go, I will go;

Where you lodge, I will lodge;

Your people shall be my people, and your God my God (Ruth 1:16)

Naomi was a type of mentor for Ruth and guided her as she learnt many life-skills such as how to make decisions and respond to various situations in a new culture. Naomi gave Ruth self-confidence, taught her about God and through shared experiences showed Ruth how faith becomes part of life. Another story of mentoring is Jesus' close relationship with his twelve disciples, especially Peter. "Peter is challenged to do things that he does not believe he can do, to discover new things about God, and to live as a disciple of Christ" (Lawrie, 1998, p. 4). Timothy and Paul also had a strong mentoring relationship that started when Timothy journeyed with Paul. As their relationship developed Paul gradually gave Timothy more responsibility for ministry. "He corrected Timothy when things went wrong, but above all he respected, valued, supported and encouraged Timothy. And Timothy grew in stature and wisdom" (Lawrie, 1998, p. 4).

In modern times, in the 1980s, formal mentoring programs were introduced in the American education sector. In the 1990s in Australia similar programs were developed. In our culture, the term 'mentor' is generally associated with a person who has knowledge or expertise in a specific area. Pastor Bob Shank of South Coast Community Church in California defines mentoring as a transfer of wisdom from one person to another.

Mentoring is purposeful, intentional, and planned; mentoring is a transfer of wisdom based on one's life experiences rather than the transfer of knowledge systems or behavioural techniques; and mentoring happens in a one-to-one personal relationship through time." (Shank, cited in Otto, 2001, p. 17)

What does it take to be a mentor? Tilley (2002, pp. 17-18) strongly asserts that "Mentors need to be committed to the educational exercise and to take an interest in the personal and professional development of the mentee. Mentors need to be flexible enough to tolerate and appreciate the uniqueness and individuality of the mentees". It is crucial that mentors have good interpersonal skills and the ability to:

- listen;
- deal with differences of opinion;
- ask open questions;
- focus on the mentee's agenda;
- be flexible and creative;
- use these skills for the benefit of the other person; and
- be ready to leave the mentoring role when it is no longer appropriate or requested. (Letting go is a difficult element of mentoring).

University lecturers are now expected to be mentors for first year students who may experience problems with the transition to a tertiary education environment. Several issues may cause these problems, a common issue being the need to make a connection to the University. One mentee recalls how she felt on her first day at university.

Arriving at University for the first time after having spent 13 years at school, was daunting to say the least. J 26/5/02

One university mentoring program aimed at helping students through transition

The staff-student mentoring program reported in this paper formed part of a Deakin University first year transition process and was set in place to assist students to adapt to the academic environment. The program was recommended by the Teaching and Learning Management Plan as policy and was piloted in 2002. Faculties were to allocate a staff person to a student. In most cases this staff person would be the one with whom the student would have contact in their academic studies. During the first six weeks of the semester the staff person (the mentor) makes contact with the allocated students (mentees) to introduce him/herself, establish a relationship and set a schedule or method of contact for the next six weeks. The critical component of the program is that students are made to feel welcome and know that someone is interested in how they are handling their units and courses. Each mentor determines the most appropriate form of contact - face to face, telephone, email or hard mail. The anticipated outcomes of this mentoring process are:

1. Students feel part of the faculty and University as a whole.
2. Students are confident to approach academic staff and discuss issues.
3. Students attend and actively participate in the academic program.
4. Increased staff awareness of the issues facing new students and a developing knowledge of the support services available to assist students and staff.

Below is one mentee's comment about the outcomes of the mentoring program.

I liked the idea of a mentor program and I think that there should be defined targets for this program. This could help to explain what the program is designed for. Outcomes and goals like, be able to meet a lecturer on first name basis or know the names and faces of two or three other students around the campus. A 1/6/02

In the Faculty of Education a working party for the mentoring program was set up. The working party decided to randomly select 54 students (approximately 25% of the total enrolled), in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree and invite them to participate in the mentoring program. These students received letters inviting them to meet in small groups led by a staff member who was to be their mentor. Two students recall their initial reactions on receiving their letters.

As a first year student I was invited to participate in a program to help ease me into University life. In February when I received a letter in the post that invited me to participate in the mentoring program, I was very surprised and thought why me? I wasn't sure whether I should take part in the program. I decided that I would, I thought that if there is anything that will support me in the process of adjusting to university life then I would take it. The meetings were set up weekly, where we would meet for under an hour and share our feelings and experiences. J 13/5/02

I was a bit hesitant about the mentoring when I first received the letter in the mail. Would the people be nice? But I thought that since my first year at Uni in 1999 has been such a strain I should embrace anything that might help me settle in better this time around. I am really glad I did. C 3/5/02

Benefits of a heterogeneous group

A few days after the letters of invitation had been posted I telephoned my assigned students to organise the first meeting in Orientation week. During this session we decided to meet for approximately one hour at 2pm on Mondays. We would meet weekly for the first two weeks and then fortnightly. What we would focus on in the sessions was left open, in order to meet the mentees' agenda. Our group became larger when two girls who had not been selected asked if they could join our group. Our group of eight consisted of two males and six females. Of these, six students regularly turned up for the mentoring sessions. (Unfortunately once syndicate groups were formed for the Education Studies unit one male could no longer attend due to the timetable clash). It was a heterogeneous group, with several mature age students, two of whom had transferred from other universities, one was returning to study after working as a bank manager, and two students were direct from VCE. Below are two mentees' descriptions concerning the value of the heterogeneous group.

The program involved a group of first year students that were all studying towards the same degree, but most of us had different backgrounds. A couple of girls were straight out of school; a few of us were in our early 20s and had been working for a few years and another who is a father with a previous history of working in the bank. This mixture was useful in the way that we were able to share different experiences. J 13/5/02

I think to have a mix of people was important as we were introduced to each other in a welcoming and friendly manner that fostered a feeling of safety and friendship within the group as a whole. People from different age and backgrounds found a group where they could share their experiences. I think that for some it meant that they had a friendly face to speak to. (I noted several of the shy girls felt that they could speak up by the second meeting). A 1/6/02

Throughout the mentoring process no 'set guidelines' directed my role as mentor (although there was a mentoring package on the University website), and there was no set structure for each session. I felt comfortable allowing the format of each session to follow the mentees' interests and concerns at the time. In my view a compulsory format would have been restrictive and I valued the flexibility. However this lack of structure may not suit all faculty mentors. How did the mentees in my group feel about the informal structure? Below they describe their feelings about the format of the mentoring program. They believed that the lack of formal structure encouraged meaningful interaction.

We had weekly or fortnightly meetings in which we would share questions or problems we had been having in particular subjects and would be able to reassure each other that we weren't the only ones feeling lost or confused. J 26/5/02

The mentor program worked for our group despite the lack of formal structure or framework given to the staff. This was due mainly to Dr Jane's honest and caring nature shown openly from the very first meeting. She was genuinely interested in learning about how 1st years found the university especially during the first few weeks and the orientation week program. A 1/6/02

Even though the program does not have any formal structure that we have followed, I think that it has been useful in having it that way. As it allows the people involved to introduce personal fears and questions. J 13/5/02

The fortnightly meetings were great. Relaxed, and just an opportunity to tell each other what's been going on. In that way I think it was really a great social thing. Plus it was fantastic having somewhere to ask questions that came up and not sound like an idiot.

I think it would be awesome for everyone to be involved in a mentoring group. A lot of the time I don't think we needed "guidance" but it was just great social interaction with people you would otherwise not have met. But I'm not sure if it would work as well if people were forced or required to attend. I think what made our group work so well was that we wanted to meet and it wasn't some big structured thing. C 3/5/02

Reaching deeper levels in the mentoring sessions

During the mentoring sessions the group focused on the concerns and issues that arose in day-to-day university life that the mentees wanted to talk about. As time progressed such discussions moved to a more personal level as can be seen in the session outlines below.

Week 1.

Meet mentor group. "Get to know you" (name, major focus etc).

Week 2.

Have there been any problems? Are timetables worked out?

Week 4.

A social time, talking about families and means of transport to the university.

Week 6.

Discussion about assessment, assignment commitments and meeting deadlines.

Two girls brought their lunch to the session that led to a discussion about the university's eating venues. They felt apprehensive about going to the Einstein's Restaurant venue, so we decided to all have lunch there in two weeks time.

Week 8.

Lunch at Einstein's Restaurant.

Week 9.

Celebration of one mentee's birthday and break up party to signal closure for the group.

Perhaps one reason for the success of this mentoring group was that I was not responsible for the assessment of the mentees' work because I did not teach them in their academic program. The mentees did not feel threatened and could talk openly and honestly about the assessment tasks.

Coding the mentoring experience according to the intended outcomes

The mentees' comments about the program were coded according to the intended outcomes of the mentoring program. Coding revealed that the main outcomes for students were that they felt connected to the faculty and they were attending University lectures and tutorials. The achieved outcomes are identified below supported by mentees' written feedback.

Outcome 1. Students feel part of the faculty and University as a whole.

The mentor program has been a fantastic way to ease into uni life with a group of others in the same position as yourself. J 26/5/02

What I found very useful is the fact that we were introduced to a variety of different people, but also it gave you a good start in feeling comfortable at University. J 11/5/02

I think it's been a really good experience and I'm really glad that we're still meeting up to have such great laughs. C 3/5/2002

I think that the program should run again next year as there were no negative aspects that I could see to a program like this except the premium of time given up by lecturers at this very busy time of year. I found the meetings that were held in Dr Jane's office to be a good jump-start to the year and found the experience fun and enjoyable. A 1/6/02

Written on a postcard from Japan Thank you for your support this year in the first semester. Please send my regards to the others from the group if/when you see them next. J 22/9/02

Outcome 2. Students are confident to approach academic staff and discuss issues.

Being a part of a mentor group within my course meant having a smaller group of people to go through the new experiences with. Having someone from the education faculty to go to with queries was also a huge relief in those first few tentative weeks. J 26/5/02

Outcomes 1 & 3. Students feel part of the faculty and University as a whole, attend and actively participate in the academic program.

My first experience at Uni (1999) was that it was really hard to make friends. For me that was one of the big bonuses of this mentoring group. It gave me faces I recognised, people I could sit with in lectures and tutes. C 3/5/02

I've formed some great friendships through the mentoring group and it's somewhat reassuring to be able to walk into a class and know that you have someone to sit with. J 26/5/02

I found that even students that had meetings only two or three times benefited in that they were able to recognise a number of students around, some have formed friendship groups in classes. A 1/6/02

I thought the Mentor program was a really good way to meet and talk to people you mightn't otherwise have the courage to talk to. When uni starts and you know no one it can be really scary and no one wants to admit that they need help. Having the mentor program then gives people the chance to meet more people and discuss common issues with other people who otherwise would be feeling lost too! It's really nice too, to be able to talk to a group of people who you might not normally speak to. C 3/5/2002

Outcome 3. Students attend and actively participate in the academic program.

One of the most encouraging outcomes was the increased confidence and development shown by the two mentees who had come to university straight from VCE. They volunteered

to speak at the University's Open Day and willingly shared their experiences of university life with 130 people in the Faculty of Education's Information session.

For me the mentoring experience with first year education students was very positive and enjoyable. Our regular chats fostered a sense of connectedness that enables each group member to settle in quickly and happily to university life. Mentor, First Year Initiative flyer
18/10/02

Outcome 4. Increased staff awareness of the issues facing new students a developing knowledge of the support services available to assist students and staff.

The mentoring sessions increased my awareness of the difficulties first year students face on a day-to-day basis as they begin their university studies. I also learnt that there was a mature age students' room and it has a microwave!! I consider my involvement in the mentoring program was a valuable use of my time as an academic professional.

Decoding the mentoring experience with Parker Palmer

The question - What was it about this group that allowed successful mentoring to happen? - led me to engage with Parker Palmer's ideas about mentoring. Palmer highlights the mutuality aspect of mentoring.

A mutuality that requires more than meeting the right teacher; the teacher must meet the right student. In this encounter, not only are the qualities of the mentor revealed, but the qualities of the student are drawn out in a way that is equally revealing. (Palmer, 1998, p. 21)

Communal mentoring occurred as the mentees developed positive relationships with each other and myself. Mallison (1998, p. 8) asserts that "Good mentoring involves bonding, connectedness, rapport, mateship, affinity, things in common and genuine concern." The relationships that developed within the mentoring group were dynamic and grew to be stimulating and empowering. Trust developed fairly quickly and by the third session the mentees felt comfortable and confident to express their concerns openly to members of the group. There was a lot of 'peer' mentoring happening and the shared relationships involved both giving and receiving. The mentees enjoyed being together and they were always on time and often in my office before the scheduled session at 2pm.

My involvement as a mentor in this program became a learning experience for me. I enjoyed seeing the mentees grow personally. On reflection I realise that my main role could be described as 'encourager', and I made sure that there was always a positive and helpful outcome from each session. I view mentoring as a holistic experience that is mentee-centred rather than performance-centred. For Mallison (1998, p. 87) "The ideal mentor is a functional mentor, responding to the needs of the mentees in varying situations." I tried to identify the mentees' real needs by being a good listener. Parker Palmer (1998) describes the value, for the mentor, of listening in dialogue.

Forced to listen, respond, and improvise, I am more likely to hear something unexpected and insightful from myself as well as others. My identity is more fulfilled in dialogue. (Palmer, 1988, p. 24)

The process of reflecting on the mentoring experience has been helpful because I recognise that I have used my gift of interaction with the group. Palmer highlights the value of reflection

in that it can help me to know myself better and in turn have more realistic expectations of my students.

The self-knowledge that comes from these reflections is crucial to my teaching, for it reveals a complexity within me that is within my students as well. If I can remember the inner pluralism of my own soul and the slow pace of my own self-emergence, I will be better able to serve the pluralism among my students at the pace of their young lives. (Palmer, 1998, p. 24)

Through my involvement in the mentoring process I consider "my identity and integrity had new chances to evolve in each new encounter with my students' lives" (Palmer, 1998, p. 25). I became more attuned to the mentees' needs as they experienced university life. Palmer captures the uniqueness of mentoring when he states:

Mentors and mentees are partners in the dance of spiralling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn. (Palmer, 1998, p. 25)

Each member of the group brought their own perspective to the sessions. As the mentees offered their opinions freely and shared their experiences the group became knowledgeable about their course and the university. Palmer refers to this collective knowledge as insights.

If you can get all of these people and their perceptions to multiply exponentially in a good group process, it is sometimes possible for a collection of amateurs to come up with solid insights. (Palmer, 1998, p. 126)

Palmer argues for the 'pedagogical power of the community of truth' because "The human brain works best with information presented not in the form of isolated data bits but in patterns of meaningful connection, in a community of data, as it were" (Palmer, 1998, p. 127). Our mentoring group had pedagogical power that helped the mentees to learn about university life together. Palmer (1998, p. 127) recognises the value of connected learning. "Learning together also offers them a chance to look at reality through the eyes of others: instead of forcing them to process everything through their own limited vision." I see connected learning as being particularly useful within the context of the tertiary community.

Conclusion

The rich mentoring experience described in this paper was beneficial for the first year students involved. Each student gave positive feedback concerning the mentoring process. All mentees revealed that they felt comfortable and happy about settling in to university life. They knew that there would be friendly faces in lectures and people they could sit with. The mentoring sessions helped to foster a sense of connectedness, and often it was the mentees who solved one another's problems. The mentees also felt that they could communicate with a member of staff who was genuinely interested in them. Using Parker Palmer's terms, the group situation had pedagogical power as different perspectives were shared, resulting in a positive and enjoyable experience of university life.

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