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Mentoring: Boosting self-worth, optimising potential

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Abstract

Most models of mentoring aim to attune newcomers to the philosophies of appropriate social practices. Knowledge gained can lead to community membership, give voice to newcomers and sanction them to take an active role. To confine the application of mentoring to workplace situations, whereby new members are integrated into ‘appropriate practices’, takes a narrow view. In this paper we consider both educational and broader community applications of mentoring in which more adept members support others less proficient in day-to-day institutional and social skills. Successful relationships involve mentors who encourage their mentees through dialogue and modelling. Rather than impose particular ways of performing, they assess mentees’ needs and initiate strategies of self-help. In the studies we draw upon time, patience and personal commitment are fundamental to mentees developing emotional stability, social empowerment and personal motivation to take on proactive roles. The attainment of appropriate knowledge corresponds with a boosted sense of self-worth and an “optimistic sense of efficacy [that] fosters psychological well-being and personal accomplishments” (Bandura, 1997:75).

Introduction

Most models of mentoring aim to attune newcomers to the philosophies of appropriate social practices. Knowledge gained can lead to community membership, give voice to newcomers and sanction them to take an active role as they gain confidence and competence. The concept of competencies conjures up visions of tick the box lists to show that certain abilities are attained but competencies per se express the literacies of social practice. Gee (1999) refers to a person’s cultural model that is ‘rooted in the practices of socio-culturally defined groups and people’ and shapes their outlook (p. 43). Cultural models, like codes of practice, give meaning to the social and cultural practices and instill traditions, values and behaviours. We claim that the attainment of appropriate socio-cultural knowledge corresponds with a boosted sense of self-worth and an “optimistic sense of efficacy [that] fosters psychological well-being and personal accomplishments” (Bandura, 1997:75). In this paper we draw on several experiences of mentoring and consider these in relation to the recent literature. We reflect on our prior research studies and evaluations of mentoring processes, and also recall personal experiences, which alert us to another dimension. In this way we take a multi-faceted look at mentoring by examining it through multiple lenses.

Focal to our discussion is the notion of community membership and relationships, which impact on a person being an insider, or alternatively one who is placed on the margins. Those situated on the margins encounter some extraordinary problems. Often as

outsiders, they lack socio-cultural knowledge and skills and the know-how of community philosophies and practice. While some outsiders actively seek access, others feel restrictions imposed by difference and social distance. For newcomers, or those situated on the margins, innate 'taken-for-granted' community practices are unwritten and 'things-we-have-always-been-doing' unclear (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004). We hold the view that relationships between current members and outsiders, or established members and newcomers, can alleviate tensions and be a vital link for newcomers who seek right of entry.

We begin with personal reflections of our own experiences, both as mentors and mentees. Then we describe our recent studies involving immigrant teachers and a community scheme, where mentoring played significant roles in facilitating community access. Through the diversity of our experiences and the programs we describe, our analysis enables us to understand elements of successful mentoring and the benefits of well-matched pairs.

An effective mentor draws out the qualities of the mentee. Our understanding of what effective mentors do is consistent with the following view.

Effective mentors go with their mentees into real-life situations, ask them what they see and hear, ask for their tentative judgement, let them commit an error and discuss the consequences, and thereby help them in acquiring a disciplined, thoughtful approach to real life problems. (Greenleaf, 1998:102)

As mentoring is a mutual encounter, in addition to looking at what makes a good mentor, we can ask the question: What was it about the mentee that allows great mentoring to happen? This question is addressed in part through personal reflections on our own mentoring experiences.

Personal reflections on mentoring

Our interest in mentoring was initiated through an informal and unexpected meeting. When we first met I (Eleanor) was a member of an expanding outer suburban community to which Beverley was a newcomer. Drawing on my local knowledge I 'initiated' her into the traditions of community and why things were done in particular ways and she realised their rationale. We found we had several things in common, none-the-less the university and our interest in primary school education.

In a strange turn of events, I (Eleanor) took on a new role at the university and Beverley became my unofficial mentor. In this situation I was the newcomer and Beverley the more knowledgeable other who used her knowledge in positive yet subtle ways to guide and lead me. Reflecting on the process involved, I clearly recall conversations over coffee where I learned what actions to take. Beverley's confidence in me nurtured a satisfying feeling and sense that I was meeting the demands of the role. However, at times my confidence waned. Demands of the course burgeoned like heavy, grey clouds when a storm is brewing. I felt shaky about my identity in the role and began to question who I was and what I was doing. Bearing in mind my responsibilities, and knowing that

self-doubt would envelop me and erase my confidence, I deliberately pushed aside my doubts. Sparks of hope led me to believe in myself-as-professional, which was central to fulfilling my role and satisfying my sense of efficacy.

By analysing the shifting nature of my confidence, as it swayed between positive and negative, I recognise the fluidity of my feelings. My state of flux responded to situational stimuli. This feeling resembled the idea that perceptions of self simultaneously respond and transform independently and interdependently in infinite processes of reconstruction and re-identification (Peeler & Jane, 2005).

As our (Beverley and Eleanor) professional and personal relationships flourished we travelled side-by-side, at times mentor and guide, while at other times, mentee and recipient of the other's insider knowledge. The relationship, mutually beneficial, was characterised by informal and formal elements, and involved on-going support. On reflection, we recognise the socio-cultural, situational and relational elements involved in bridging the gap, where the one who was more adept assisted the other, who was perceived as less able to operate effectively (Jane & Peeler, 2003).

Links with recent literature

In a similar way, Kostogriz (2004) upholds that one's construction of self is situational and determined by others present, or with whom one interacts in a particular place and time. Our understanding is that perceptions of self constantly react and adjust, in relation to each unique interaction and the relationships within.

Our early collegial research involved immigrant teachers and their transitions into the education system in Victoria, Australia. In many respects, their experiences are like all new teachers, who must learn to understand the macro-culture of the education system and the micro-culture of individual schools as well as the nano-culture of classrooms. We considered how mentoring programs helped both groups, either at the university (Jane, 2007) or in positions in schools and argued that informality led to the development of supporting relationships (Jane & Peeler, 2003). Our research findings are consistent with Evans (2000) who prefers informal relationships and Ball's (2000) view that guidance and negotiation alert newcomers to knowledge to negotiate meaning. Similar to my (Eleanor) own experience described above, Farrell (2000) and Hall (1991) identify the fluidity of change and the theory proposed by Seah and Bishop (2001) of continual re-negotiation of personal and professional positions.

Both situations exemplify the Vygotskian view that more capable members of a community assist those with less knowledge extend their trajectory of development. They also illustrate the notion of situationality, where the relationship of those involved in the particular situation is a critical factor (Kostogriz, 2004). In Vygotsky's notion of cultural development all higher mental functions appear first on the interpsychological plane (between people) and then on the intrapsychological plane (within the individual). "In the transition, any change in interpsychological functioning involves a corresponding change in the intrapsychological functioning" (Wertsch, 1985:158). A person's sense of efficacy is social as well as situational, and is important for mental health as Bandura (1997:75)

identifies “an optimistic sense of efficacy fosters psychological well-being and personal accomplishments”.

The mentoring process is a means of connecting newcomers with community structures. Bond (1999) recognises the positive social benefits that successful mentoring brings, which are shared by all involved, including the community as a whole. The community benefits, as a resolve is taken to prevent problems, by breaking down cultural barriers. For mentees, the benefits pertain to insight into the community culture and ethos, encouragement, assistance and guidance. Positive feedback helps them grow personally and develop confidence and self-esteem. In turn there are positive benefits for mentors, which include confidence, personal satisfaction, and understanding of self as well as others. They are able to further develop their own communication, listening, organization and interpersonal skills.

Reflections on immigrant teachers’ experiences

The mentoring experiences of immigrant teachers in Victorian schools became our research focus. We were aware that their migratory circumstances exposed them to fractures in their understandings as they came-to-terms with changed circumstances in their new environments (Hall, 1997). The situation we describe below looks bleak and echoes socio-cultural, situational and relational tensions, such as described by Hall (1991, 1997) that result from frictional interactions with others who hold culturally different viewpoints. From narrative insights shared by a small group of immigrant women teachers (Peeler, 2005) we gain a better understanding of their situation. We envisage their shifting into new communities of practice in terms of Rogoff’s (1998) socio-cultural frame, which allows us to consider the culture of education in Victorian schools holistically and then to fine-tune our lens to focus on schools and classrooms. Our understandings resembled those presented by Kostogriz (2002) as we recognised the perpetual tensions between the individual and group ideals that provoked a state of flux as the immigrant women shifted between past and present ways of ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ education.

The state of flux was interactional as well as situational. It occurred between the macro and micro cultures of schools and resembled the communities in which the individual teachers were involved. This viewpoint corresponds with Rogoff’s (1998) socio-cultural model that defines three levels or planes of interaction, namely community/institutional, interpersonal and personal. From this standpoint, individuals’ interactions can be analysed according to their socio-cultural ability to interact on all three planes, the personal, interpersonal and community. For instance, immigrant teachers make huge leaps in their cultural understandings in the macro-culture of education that sustain the British system and many elements of British traditions (Bishop, 1990). In new-for-them micro-cultural settings of schools, they are exposed to one-way demands to adjust to the local system and philosophies (Kamler, Reid & Santoro, 1999). It is a climate rife with tension due in part to employers’ scepticism of their qualifications, skills and knowledge (Santoro, 1999; Inglis & Philips, 1993) and colleagues preference to avoid change and continue to ‘do-the-things-we-have-always-been-doing’ (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004).

Colleagues frequently underestimate the impact of change on the immigrant newcomers and show little regard for their position (Peeler, 2005).

Although we place the immigrant teachers in a negative scene, our intent is to highlight the dilemmas they are likely to face. The situation is clearly depicted by Kostogriz and Peeler (2004) who claim that negative perceptions towards the prior knowledge and experience of immigrant teachers signify that these teachers' professional status is undervalued and virtually disqualified. Disqualification and non-recognition of their professional identity is profound, causing them to view themselves in a non-professional capacity. The issue of non-recognition overflows into classrooms where they tend to meet unnecessary challenges to their teaching and management routines. Tension is rife in this micro-culture too, where student learning is at stake. Effective teaching requires the newcomers to acquire appropriate socio-cultural knowledge and suitable teaching techniques in order to recognise self as professional and in turn be recognised as such by students. For these teachers, the self and identity are developed within their school communities.

We conceive of identities as long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice. Thus identity, knowing and social membership entail one another. (Lave & Wenger, 2005:153)

When Palmer writes about teaching and true self, he identifies that "identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials" (1998:13). The self can be stretched to a point but also has its limits.

Like other newcomers, immigrant teachers are open to scrutiny (Kamler et al., 1999) by other community members. In schools, longer-serving staff members are often reluctant to change, and prefer to do things the same way (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004; Goodson, 2003). Like Ball (2000) we realise that current staff hold the key to bridging the gap for newcomers, by helping them understand the philosophies and practicalities of teaching, and inform them of specific contextual orientations. Below, experiences of Kim illustrate some of the small, yet significant, differences these newcomers face and must overcome. As a newcomer to the TAFE environment, Kim was overwhelmed, but in this instance she is offered support.

All the acronyms, all the courses, like, you know they're talking about ELICOS, they're talking about CGEA ... I don't understand what they're talking about (mm) and what they're referring to, and also it's a new environment ... I felt like this is just too much for me.

My teaching partner, she said to me 'How're you going Kim?' ... she said 'You did very well' and then I nearly collapsed and she says 'No, you did very well', I said 'Oh! My goodness!' (laugh) and then since that, I mean there was so much information to take in at the start.

Our research revealed that guidance by longer serving staff minimised tensions and helped the newcomers acquire appropriate knowledge. They were thus able to negotiate meaning concerning new and unfamiliar routines and ways of performing. Informal relationships had a positive impact on their ability to adapt and were beneficial to their career development, and in the future might lead to longer-term supportive relationships. We identified that those successful relationships involved mentors who encouraged their mentees through dialogue and modelling. Rather than impose particular ways of performing, they assessed mentees' particular needs and initiated strategies of self-help. Akiko had a mentoring scheme in her school and described her mentor in the following manner.

*He is Australian, and he's a classroom teacher, uh, he's teaching at Grade 1, 2, but **he was a Japanese teacher** last year - actually he – **he lived in Japan** as well, but **he can speak a bit of Japanese**, and he taught Japanese for five years in secondary and also primary school ... he is the mentor and it's very good because he knows how to teach LOTE, yeah, and also he knows how Australian education system works as well.*

We see an interesting turn in the relationship here. It has developed over a period of time and the mentee teacher looks critically at her mentor's Japanese language skills. The relationship has a sense of informality and an air of friendliness, and the balance of power has shifted in some respects. While the mentor still willingly shares his knowledge, Akiko recognises her own power, her Japanese born heritage. At the same time the mentor is still available to help her in ways that she requests, or in other words, provides an appropriate model for her to follow.

Reflections on community-based mentoring

We turn our attention to another mentoring program, which was community-based, and organised cooperatively by local community, church and government groups. This future orientated scheme, was devised in response to 'high social, emotional, psychological, economic, material and spiritual needs' of residents living in suburbs in outer South-Eastern Melbourne. The program's focus was on "early intervention and prevention of problems" and aimed to find "local solutions to local problems" (Gale, Peeler & Jane, 2006:2).

Mentors in this scheme were well-established community members, whereas the mentees lacked social knowledge and skills. The mentors were all volunteers who were carefully selected, and pairs were prudently matched. Mentees were generally younger than their mentors, with most having retired and now worked voluntarily. Generally, mentor and mentee perceptions of the relationships were positive. Similarly they shared the view that the program was socially beneficial.

The program aimed to 'build community capacity' by drawing on community resources and developing 'one-on-one relationships with self-identified families in need'. The underlying philosophy was to "bring out the best in people's capabilities and help them

make use of their own resource” (C.O.A.C.H. Training Manual, 2004:10). Mentors undertook multiple roles as counsellor, goal-setting guide, facilitator of their mentees’ development, and at times, advocate on their behalf.

The coaching approach to mentoring had three vital aims:

- (i) To build a relationship;
- (ii) To explore and clarify problems; and
- (iii) To decide on and implement an action plan.

These aims can be aligned to Rogoff’s (1998) socio-cultural planes, whereby developing interpersonal skills equip the mentee with appropriate skills to take a place in the broader community.

The complexity of a mentee’s situation can be explained by looking at typical social problems many experience. Often they are victims with intergenerational patterns of welfare related issues, with grandmother and mother having had mental health problems. They have had child protection involvement and there is a history of broken relationships, with a lack of consistency, stability and resources. Their families are complex and the problems are many, such as drug and alcohol addiction and poor mental health, compounding because they are happening all at once. In many respects the mentees could be described as ‘social down and outers’.

In this mentoring program mutuality was a key aspect and, although the ideal was to develop the mentees’ social skills, these should not be imposed. Rather, pathways towards personal goals were developed cooperatively. In many instances appropriate behaviours, or ways of performing even simple social tasks, were modelled. Learning how to manage one’s self in interviews with government agencies, and developing confidence to mix socially, were major concerns. Ways of caring for children and understanding how to establish behavioural standards were other common issues.

It was important for mentors to develop a relationship with their mentees. Generally, this took time and patience to develop a sense of trust. Initially, mentees were fearful of becoming too close for fear of judgment. However, once a relationship was established, the mentors identified that the mentees appreciated “*someone to care for them*”. The company they kept could be construed as an inhibiting factor. For instance, “*the community they live in, that is their support*” and within this community they seek “*the same sort of company.*” Some mentees are unable to develop, or manage, lasting relationships. One mentor commented:

My one will make a friend and the next minute she will blast the friend and it is finished ... we all need something otherwise we will shrivel up.

Mentees felt their biggest problem was “*keeping the family together in a happy way ... watching out for all of them*” and “*managing and maintaining the children*”. Many were hindered by domestic violence and their naivety towards this issue. One woman speaks for others, “*Women I have known don’t even know that it doesn’t have to happen and I*

think the guys need to be educated". Other problems were financial or involved drugs. Some managed to 'kick' the habit but they remained a burden for others. Often they blamed their locality for their problems and felt the social stigma attached, as one mentee identifies.

Living in a ministry house, even to your neighbours you are scum. It doesn't matter who you are and what you do you are scum. You are preconceived as soon as you move into that house ... you are not worth knowing ... once you are in ministry [housing] you have no rental history.

Once established, the relationship is best kept at a friendship level as a formal arrangement can undermine the mentee's confidence. The relationship was not always easy to establish as it involved depth and 'trust on a really intimate level'. However, one mentor said that once established, "*you can actually push them a bit more when that trust is built*". Another said that ideally, mentor and mentee should "*see each other as equals rather than power inequality [and develop a] sense of community; friendship*".

Commitment and being non-judgmental, as illustrated by the mentor in the case below, can lead to trust and longevity in the relationship that is worthwhile from both mentor and mentee points of view.

It should be on a friendship level I think, be able to sit down and 'how is your week?' and you have got to be willing to get down to their level and go where they go, within reason and maybe direct them, like she will go into the pokies and I will go in and say 'this is your last ten dollars, remember your kid's coming this week' ... you have to be willing to experience a little bit of where they are at, being strong about it and accept them, non judgemental, at the same time always dropping seeds to make them really think about what they are doing then and there.

Analysis: common threads

As caring adults we give and receive informal mentoring every day (Wicks, 2000), yet the value of mentoring relationships has tended to be somewhat overlooked by communities and organizations. When we reflect on the three types of mentoring discussed in this paper the following commonalities emerge.

- Situationality was a factor because the success of the situation itself is dependent on those involved at a particular time and place.
- Development of a positive relationship between those involved was vital and mutuality was the key.
- Mentee's needs were carefully assessed by the mentor. In some cases the more knowledgeable one gently led the other towards specific goals, which were set collaboratively or by the mentee.

- From a socio-cultural perspective, moving from the personal to interpersonal and community planes, was progressive and could take time. The acquisition of new knowledge gradually accumulated and enhanced the mentee's confidence to risk-take.
- Satisfaction in regards to success, was collaborative, and shared by mentor and mentee.
- As the mentee's confidence was enhanced, the mentor stepped aside to assume a less prominent role, but was able to observe the mentee's increased sense of efficacy. Early demands showed signs of tension, but as a mentee's trajectory of confidence heightened, the mentor's role became less significant.
- On-going commitment was vital, although the level of commitment ebbed and flowed according to the mentee's needs that varied according to stage and situation.
- Mutuality and longevity were evident in successful mentoring relationships.

Conclusion

In the accounts of the varied mentoring experiences presented here, rather than impose particular ways of performing, effective mentors assess mentees' needs and initiate strategies of self-help. In our studies drawn upon in this paper, the mentors' time, patience and personal commitment are fundamental to the mentees developing the emotional stability, social empowerment and personal motivation to take on proactive roles. Participation in the mentoring process developed the mentees' identity and an optimistic sense of efficacy, which evolved during encounters with the mentors. For the mentees the attainment of appropriate knowledge corresponds with a boosted sense of self-worth.

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