

ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS AT A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY CAMPUS: A FRESH LOOK AT FACULTY MENTORING

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ABSTRACT

Early in 2005, Joy Penman and Kerre Willsher, lecturers in nursing at a regional university campus, initiated a mentoring programme aimed at assisting Kerre's smooth transition into a university academic role. Kerre is an experienced clinician but without experience in teaching at tertiary level, while Joy is an experienced academic both locally and abroad. The mentee-mentor relationship quickly developed into an academic partnership, where both of us were profiting from the relationship personally and professionally. The horizontal, one-on-one, and personally-driven relationship that eventuated was viewed to be more satisfactory in comparison with the vertical relationship described by most faculty mentoring programmes available. This paper presents a description, evaluation and analysis of the academic partnership that developed, highlighting the benefits of undertaking such learning partnerships in tertiary institutions.

BACKGROUND

Staff development opportunities are important for academic institutions. Many of these professional development programmes aim to assist marginalised academics, including new recruits who are expected to step up to the role, contribute to the academic and research environment, and map out their career pathways in the university. While this may be acceptable for many newly employed academics with previous track records in academe and research and/or with many years of relevant experience, this is a different story for other recruits who were primarily clinicians before entering academe. They may experience much stress and many challenges when entering the academic arena, which possesses a culture of its own, entirely different from what they have previously known. Of the many strategies developed to ensure the smooth transition of new academics, the use of mentoring programmes has been most popular and accepted (University of Liverpool, n.d.; Virginia Commonwealth University, 2002).

Our university has an induction programme for new staff members. The programme provides an orientation to the university, its strategic direction, structures, policies and procedures (University of South Australia Human Resources Unit, 1999). Undertaken as a workshop or a self-paced learning

programme, the induction assists the integration of new staff member to their new role, work team, and workplace. In addition, there are organised campus- and programme-specific systems to help new academics succeed. Some of these include the Teaching at UniSA programme, information technology workshops, and other learning opportunities that help foster effective performance. While all staff share the responsibility for inducting new staff, the unit head has the specific responsibility for ensuring its success.

The challenges of new academics are not unique in rural and regional settings. However, they are compounded by the regional nature of our campus. Many rural academics feel disadvantaged because we are restricted in the range of resources readily available to us (despite access to a wider university library collection), reduced access to professional colleagues, and limited in opportunities in developing our craft by comparison to our metropolitan counterparts. Kerre, as a new academic, was not involved in a mentoring programme, and so we decided to initiate a personally-driven peer-mentoring programme in addition to existing mechanisms to facilitate her assimilation within the shortest possible time.

Kerre Willsher arrived at the regional university campus to commence duties as a lecturer in the nursing unit, but without any previous Australian tertiary teaching experience. However, she had experience in teaching nursing students in Papua New Guinea and had been training childcare workers and nannies. Her experience was extended in conducting groups for new parents and she had worked for the Cancer Council of Victoria as an instructor. She also had experience in the training of Aboriginal Health workers, many of whom were semi-literate and spoke English as a second language. Kerre has qualifications in nursing, scientific philosophy, and community and public health. Joy Penman, on the other hand, is a 'veteran' with 19 years' experience in teaching at the university level. She has Masters' qualifications in pharmacy and nursing and is currently pursuing her doctoral studies. She was eager to function as a mentor and build a relationship based on shared understanding and common interests and goals with Kerre.

We decided to undertake the mentoring programme for the following reasons:

- 1) a problem-solving opportunity to address challenges in teaching and delivery of courses for Kerre, and;
- 2) motivation to help on the part of Joy.

FACULTY MENTORING PROGRAMMES

Mentoring programmes are being promoted for many reasons. These have been used as a strategy to retain staff (University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2004). Other reasons include: establishing social contacts; learning about the functioning of the University; seeking advice on academic issues; addressing feelings of isolation; and contributing to the faculty member's career development and satisfaction. The 'performance partnerships' from mentoring

programmes have resulted in impressive alterations in the manner in which individuals are educated and taught the skills of their work environments (Cobb, Hensman, Jones, & Richards, 1995, p.68).

A mentor is an experienced advisor who has a direct interest in the development of a less experienced colleague (University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, 2003). The mentor has many roles to play including; being an advisor, role model, coach and supporter. Snowber (2005) likens a mentor to an artist – listening, creating and extending boundaries and possibilities. How the mentor operates has been addressed thoroughly in literature. The mentor clarifies expectations and goals, takes time to be with the mentee and suggests strategies for effective teaching and effective interaction with students and colleagues. One of the most important guidelines to remember in the role of mentor is maintaining confidentiality (University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2004). The list of roles is long but the benefits that may be gained from becoming a mentor are encouraging. The benefits in participating in faculty mentoring programmes from the viewpoint of the mentor include, but are not limited to: gaining satisfaction in knowing that one is helping another academic; enhancing professional and personal growth; and developing additional skills in the process (University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2004; University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, 2003).

The mentee has roles to play as well, including: meeting regularly with the mentor; maintaining confidentiality; keeping up to date with university issues; asking for and giving feedback; following through on suggestions and referrals made by the mentor; and taking the responsibility for their own growth and success (University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, 2003). Having a mentor is rewarding, as one may quickly expand one's view about the university, adjust to the university culture, and receive honest feedback and advice.

Mentoring programmes may take several forms, e.g. network mentoring as differentiated from the traditional one-on-one approach, personally-driven as against institutionally-driven, and/or formal as against informal. The type of mentoring programme depends on factors such as the needs of mentees, resources available, and involvement of mentors. Regardless of the form, the relationship is based on 'encouragement, constructive comments, openness, mutual trust, respect and a willingness to learn and share' (Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment, 1996, p.5).

THE ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP

A few weeks after we agreed on the model of faculty mentoring programme model we would use, we decided to undertake a dramatic change and adopt a partnership instead. The reasons for the change to an academic partnership were as follows: Kerre had already been given ample introduction to the university; Joy recognised the value of Kerre's previous life and clinical experience, which she could learn from; both had developmental needs that

were best met by a partnership; and, the desire to continue the relationship on an ongoing, relaxed and informal basis and not be limited to a programme where the relationship would dissolve after the programme had ended. Moreover, we perceived a horizontal relationship in a partnership arrangement to foster mutual interest, enthusiasm and camaraderie rather than a vertical mentee-mentor binary. The mentee-mentor relationship, likened to novice and expert (Kostovich & Thurn, 2005), was hierarchical, formal and did not seem appropriate for us. We considered the traditional mentoring format to be controlled by the mentor, who more often than not, is the head of the unit and the mentee participating passively, imbibing the knowledge and wisdom of the mentor. Maher, Lindsay, Peel and Twomey (2006) support our view by stating that: "traditional methods of mentoring by senior staff often seem relics of an earlier era."

However, learning partnerships hinged on shared ownership, equal control of learning, and mutual respect (Young & Paterson, 2007). In the partnership of learners, the focus was on building community (Varcoe & McCormick, 2007) and emphasis was placed on the processes of learning. In other words, both partners engaging with one another in learning through understanding and knowing themselves and building a relationship were integral. This involved spending time with each other, getting to know each other as individuals, and being open to learning. The end results of learning partnerships are increased motivation and better learning outcomes.

In setting up the partnership, we clarified our objectives and these were to: assist in our current roles as lecturers and course coordinators; improve student evaluations of course and teaching; be able to manage student attitude and problematic behaviour; evaluate our partnership and reflect on personal experiences; discuss personal and academic issues and foster a cooperative network; boost morale and increase motivation; and, gain more insight into teaching approaches and ways to improve the practice of teaching. The partnership arrangement designed was casual, straightforward and uncomplicated.

EVALUATION OF THE PARTNERSHIP AND RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

Critical reflection was used to evaluate our partnership. We agreed to maintain a detailed log of everything discussed and to journal events, thoughts, perceptions and musings about our partnership. We reflected on our roles and contribution to the partnership, as well as on the impact of the partnership on our teaching and learning practice. We deliberated on our teaching practices and ways these could be improved. Critical self-reflection was the beginning point and an ongoing commitment in teaching (Young & Paterson, 2007) enhanced self-awareness. The results of our reflections, categorised as personal or professional growth and development, are summarised below.

Personal growth and development

Kerre found a safe environment for individual discussion and support. She found a friend and this reduced feelings of isolation. As she was learning and steadily developing personal competence, her confidence increased as a valuable member of the team. Various things she discovered were: her commitment to the partnership process; eagerness to learn and adjust to individual circumstances; and her passion for learning and sharing knowledge. The partnership provided opportunities for space and time to reflect on her teaching, which was necessary for self-examination. In the midst of these numerous conversations and partnership-building activities, critical reflection was enhanced, providing a clearer view about herself. The relationship extended to all staff caring for her, and she in turn was able to assist another new academic. She found that there was very little uniformity in management of subjects but that all members of staff were able to assist constructively. She is surviving and is continuously building her knowledge base, and these factors have influenced her decision to remain in her new position.

Similarly, Joy found the partnership to be an excellent opportunity to share her love for teaching. Having twice received the Supported Teacher's Award, which recognises above average student evaluations, she was eager to share her experiences as a teacher. In addition, she learnt about herself too - her willingness to share her knowledge and experience, her creativity to provide a continuous learning environment for Kerre, and her strategies in giving objective feedback that was encouraging and motivating. Most important for her was the personal satisfaction in knowing she was helping another staff member.

Professional growth and development

Kerre suffered from information overload in the early stages, and the partnership provided many opportunities to revisit pertinent topics and issues. She was quick to learn how to give and receive feedback. Much of her learning included: effective teaching approaches; delivery of presentations; engaging effectively with students; and operating audiovisual equipment. Consequently, there was a substantial improvement in the course and teacher evaluations for her.

Joy was able to practise and hone her teaching and listening skills, her collaborative skills were polished in addition to her skills in giving advice, probing or questioning, and giving constructive feedback. In trying to be a good motivator, she displayed empathy, understanding, and supported Kerre in the areas identified. Joy benefited as she examined her own practice, shared her interests, and wrote about her unique experience.

DISCUSSION

We have expanded on the notion of mentoring and adapted elements of this to suit our needs. As we set common goals, related interdependently, empowered by our own efforts, and contributed to the nursing unit, a mutualistic and synergistic relationship was created (Vertuno, Mullen & Funk, 1999). The partnership may be likened to a transaction: two people meeting, 'colliding', interacting, and influencing each other in ways that are beneficial and empowering.

Close scrutiny reveals that our partnership went through several stages similar to the phases of mentoring relationships (University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, 2003). The first stage was referred to as the forming stage. This stage occurred during the first few meetings when both academics expressed their expectations and set common goals and objectives. The rules of engagement and roles were clarified and these included emphasising respect and observing confidentiality at all times. We agreed to hold regular weekly meetings to discuss academic issues, receive feedback and plan activities that would be beneficial for both of us. It was also during this stage that we determined the frequency and length of contact, and our accessibility as partners. What sort of support was expected from each one and what both might potentially gain from this relationship were also discussed. This was also the time to get to know each other at a deeper level; to get to know interests and ambitions - including limitations and weaknesses. Rapport and mutual trust were established, and it was decided that for personal issues, neither should offer the other advice unless explicitly asked to do so.

Stage two was developing the role as a partner. This stage was characterised as facilitating the relationship where much of the input came from Joy initially handing down her wisdom and experience. The agenda during these meetings included: how lectures, tutorials and practicals were presented; principles of adult education; how to maximise student learning; how to obtain satisfactory course and student evaluations; how to publish and present papers; how to improve the home page; and how to improve relationships with students. As she fed this information, Kerre encouraged her by attending the meetings religiously, providing feedback, taking in her suggestions, and making the necessary modifications to improve her teaching practice. On several occasions, Joy sat in on her classes, participated in the discussions and acted as arbitrator in the class debate, and this was further reinforced by continuous feedback on teaching performance. Joy took the lead early in the relationship but slowly relinquished this lead role to Kerre, who continued to reciprocate and contribute to the relationship by sharing her reflections, finding reading materials of common interest, and assisting in various academic activities.

The third stage, the plateau stage, was the most challenging phase of the partnership. The interest, enthusiasm, and effectiveness needed to be sustained. New objectives were outlined and new challenges were sought. We continued

to discover our roles in the partnership in order to reach mutual exchange and satisfaction. During this time, Joy shared her course and teaching evaluations and discussed what she would do in response to the students' comments. Kerre shared her evaluations as well and discussed the strategies to continue improving her performance. A follow-up of how the unruly students were progressing in her class was undertaken. It was learned that while the heckling had stopped, class attendance was very poor and so strategies to address this were then examined. During this stage also, Kerre observed Joy's class and gave constructive feedback as well.

The last stage of the partnership process was referred to as the extension phase. The development of self-reliance was essential and this was the focus of this stage. We envisioned that while we had no intentions of ending the relationship, there might be a point when the relationship would evolve into a new form and we would decide to continue with our roles or redefine our relationship. Extending the relationship would mean building other partnerships with other academic and non-academic staff and extending networks and linkages for Kerre. This stage would involve also evaluating the partnership and reporting the results of the evaluation, which other academics might find useful in their work places.

As in other types of collegial relationships, this arrangement is heavily dependent on our active participation. The most significant factor was to gain trust; and being open, honest, humble, and respectful facilitated this. Our relationship is unique, as we brought not only our professional lives into the relationship but our culture, values, and life experiences as well. Joy describes the small things, simple suggestions, and personal thoughts deemed helpful in boosting confidence and allaying concerns about being an academic. Grey (2005) expounded on the value and legitimacy of social learning and situated learning. There is much to be gained from the learning that occurs during discourse with peers and tea-table conversations.

The qualities of a good partner mirror the qualities of a good mentor and mentee and these refer to their willingness to be available to each other and committing time and effort to help the other colleague (University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh, 2003). Good interpersonal communication skills are imperative, such as listening, advising, supporting, encouraging, giving feedback, and motivating (University of Liverpool, n.d.). Mention must be made about expectations because we realise that Kerre would benefit from having several partners at the same time and that Joy could not fulfil all partnership roles. Also, Kerre had the final decision on academic issues she raised. Stansell (2000) recommends that leaving the neophyte to find the way was necessary, because in this manner the neophyte could test his/her instincts and gradually learn to trust his/her own thoughts and actions.

The three-way benefit of the partnership model needs to be highlighted, also determined by Gaskin, Lumpkin and Tennant (2003). This partnership provided the opportunity for personal and professional growth and development for both of us, while enriching and strengthening the university campus at the same time. The peer-colleague and/or co-learner (Morton-Cooper & Palmer, 1993; Sullivan, 2004) relationship allowed Kerre to cope better with the university structure, integrate successfully and productively into the university, reduce feelings of isolation, and increase self-knowledge. Her confidence and her course and teaching evaluations improved significantly. The partnership provided opportunities for Joy learn more about herself, gain satisfaction of knowing she was assisting a colleague, enhance partnership skills, and receive feedback about her teaching practice. The university profits as Kerre is assisted in her settling in and in becoming an effective teacher, while Joy is recharged and re-engaged with this fresh relationship. Mid-career academics need new challenges - which is what this initiative provides - in order to utilise their existing skills and continue developing further skills, strengths and insights (Curran, 2006).

However, while the university may gain from such relationships, it should provide mentoring education and support participating faculty. Although the university's Code of Good Practice in University Teaching embodies the principles of good teaching, academics must be assisted in getting the most out of academic partnerships by having their involvement supported. The Virginia Commonwealth University (2002) encourages staff by giving awards and considering involvement in mentoring programmes during promotion. Also, the academics should be able to refer any problems in the relationship to a designated person.

There were a number of challenges in this partnership. Some of these hurdles were finding time and energy, keeping the momentum going, and giving effective feedback. Realising this, we spent much time clarifying our purpose, expectations and direction. Making the relationship work requires time. In fact, the biggest obstacle reported was inadequate time to be mentor and mentee (Waugh, 1997). We circumvented this by working smartly, planning meetings, and being focused and determined. We adhered to a motto we adapted from Martin Luther King Jnr, which was 'Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?' (Australian Mentor Centre, 2005). Young and Paterson (2007, p. 547) sum up the matter succinctly when they state that we need 'to build community', which is what is happening here.

We have outlined our future plans and these include identifying areas of strength and limitations. Discussions on self-management skills, how to grow professionally as an academic, and how to improve the partnership further, will be undertaken in future meetings. The continual evaluation of the partnership will provide more evidence regarding impact and benefits.

CONCLUSION

Our reflections indicate that this partnership model is an excellent way of introducing new staff members to the university and is beneficial for us. The relationship helped meet our objectives and desired outcomes. In addition, it augmented the limited support available to regional staff. In our reflective activity, we asked ourselves how each of us had gone out of her way to help the other as a partner. 'How was I as a partner and what skills did I use in order to be an effective partner?' and 'How has this partnership benefited me personally and professionally?' were questions that guided us in our evaluation of the partnership.

Our partnership model has possibilities for effectively enhancing lifelong learning. Similarly, Mullen and Kealy (1999, p. 187) mention a powerful approach: lifelong mentoring, 'a proactive engagement of learning and teaching that embodies unique possibilities for human development'. The approach involves continually seeking, finding, reconstructing mentoring and co-mentoring relationships resulting in enabling, empowering and self-actualising the people involved in the relationship.

Mentoring has enormous applications. It should no longer be considered as an option, but as essential part of staff development and professional support. We support totally the initiative, extending and modifying it to an academic partnership, which best suited our purpose. The example of this relationship could be used as a tool to set up a partnership program for beginning academics.

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