

Mentoring TAFE teachers - support, challenge, vision, and trust

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the design, implementation and evaluation of a pilot mentoring program developed within a large TAFE institute. Empirical evidence gathered through questionnaires and interviews with mentors and mentees at the completion of a pilot program in 2006 will be presented. The mentoring program aimed to support mentors and mentees in a learning relationship that benefited both parties involved and was based on adult learning principles and critical reflection. The program centred on a five phase model: preparation; negotiation; nurturing growth; closure; and redefinition. This model has been adapted from a four phase model developed by Zachary (2000) and contextualised to meet the specific needs of a TAFE organisation. Components of the program included introductory workshops, a handbook, an optional workshop, a mentoring network, and co-ordinator support. A learner centred approach was used at all levels of the program. Workshops were facilitated using a constructivist framework and encouraged critical reflection for both mentor and mentee.

In reviewing the literature on mentoring it became clear that different organisations approach mentoring differently according to their culture and purpose. Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) make a distinction between mentoring in the North American context and mentoring in the European context. The European understanding of mentoring is more appropriate within the context of an Australian TAFE institute. In the European model of mentoring neither greater power nor seniority is required of the mentor – although greater relevant experience is. The outcome of this type of mentoring is mutual learning and development for both partners in the relationship. A number of writers have identified difficulties and negative outcomes of mentoring (for example Eby, 1997; Eby et al 2000; Long 1997; Ehrich et al 2002) that will be discussed in the context of the design and eventual outcomes of this pilot program.

Introduction

Mentoring is being increasingly acknowledged as a powerful form of work based learning, providing a potent strategy for less formal engagement around culture and practice. This is especially evident in educational settings where resource constraints and changing conceptions of pedagogy have demanded ever more innovative forms of exploration of professional discourses, which is critical to maintaining the integrity and quality of learning (Zachary, 2005; WA Department of Education and Training, 2006). This paper explores the experiences of a group of mentors and mentees in a large TAFE (with around 640 casual, permanent and contract teachers) where a teacher mentoring program has recently been implemented. This institution has had a pre-existing culture that broadly supports informal mentoring, although apart from some isolated pairings in particular departments – focussed primarily on induction mentoring – there has been no formal across faculty mentoring program for teachers.

Informal mentoring has been successful in many instances within the organisation, and a number of these early mentors assisted in informing the development of the program. These mentors were very supportive of more formal strategies that integrated

professional guidance for potential mentors and mentees, and were also keen to have the role of mentor more clearly defined and recognised at an organisational level.

Perspectives on mentoring

In reviewing the literature on mentoring, it becomes clear that different organisational approaches to mentoring strongly reflect their originating culture and environment. Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) make a distinction between mentoring in the North American context and the decidedly different mentoring framework of the European context. They conceptualise the North American mentoring model as being defined around the relationship between a “younger, less powerful and perhaps more naïve person ...guided by an older, more senior and more powerful individual...(with the aim) of sponsorship and advice on making the right career move.” (p.7) It was immediately evident that this understanding of mentoring was not appropriate within a TAFE culture. Instead, the mentoring broadly identified by Klasen and Clutterbuck as the European model - where neither greater power nor seniority is required of the mentor whilst greater relevant experience is – was more appropriate. The objective of this type of mentoring is mutual learning, and development for both partners in the relationship. The mentoring program that has been piloted at this TAFE site, the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT), was consciously designed to support mentors and mentees in a learning relationship that benefits both parties involved, with a conceptual base in contemporary learning pedagogy and a critically reflective framework.

In developing a structure for the program we were specifically informed by the work of Zachary (2000) and Kram (1985). In researching mentoring relationships that were not the result of a structured mentoring program, Kram has identified four phases of the mentoring relationship: initiation; cultivation; separation and redefinition. Zachary has identified four phases for developing a successful structured mentoring program: preparation, negotiation, enabling and closure. Zachary’s preparation and negotiation phases support mentors and mentees in establishing a mentoring relationship, with participants negotiating mutually agreeable roles and expectations. The mentoring program that was designed at CIT has built further on Zachary’s model, and consists of a five phase model: preparation; negotiation; enabling (nurturing growth); closure; and redefinition. The redefinition phase has been included to ensure that mentors and mentees are clear from the beginning that the mentoring relationship is for a fixed term and will be followed by a different type of relationship. A number of other observers have identified both impediments and negative outcomes of mentoring practices (for instance, Eby, 1997; Eby et al 2000; Long 1997; Ehrich et al 2002). In developing the CIT mentoring program, the developers were mindful of the potential problems identified in this literature and have attempted to avoid the more negative outcomes identified.

Daloz (1999) has identified support, challenge and vision as three key issues for successful mentoring of adult learners. He and others (Zachary, 2000; Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002) have also noted trust as a key component of success in mentoring relationships. Trust has been an integral aspect in the design of the CIT mentoring program, complementing notions of professional support, educational challenge and clear vision.

One of the questions that often arose in initial consultations within the institution was “what makes a good mentor?” In seeking to answer this question within the TAFE context, understanding was drawn from the work of Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002); Zachary (2000); and the NSW Department of Education (2003) who have collectively identified a range of relevant skills and attributes for successful mentoring.

Table One: Traits of a good mentor

Trait	Skills associated
Communication Skills	building and maintaining rapport; managing conflict; providing and receiving feedback
Personal attributes	enthusiastic; positive; approachable; a good sense of humour; a strong interest in helping others develop; dedicated; committed to own continued learning
Emotional intelligence	a high level of self awareness; understands how others behave; encouraging; supportive
Experience, contacts, knowledge and other skills	considerable relevant professional experience; the ability to use models to explain concepts; ability to broker relationships; goal setting skills; problem solving skills; coaching skills; reflecting; knowledge about “the way things work around here”.

Mentors are asked to identify which of these attributes and skills they see as important in effective mentoring and then to rate themselves (in terms of very comfortable, moderately comfortable, or uncomfortable) against the ones that they have chosen. They are then encouraged and supported to develop their skills in areas where they feel moderately or very uncomfortable. This approach has been received very positively by mentors.

Another area where earlier ‘informal’ mentors were seeking guidance was what should a mentor actually “do” in practice. Information was provided in initial workshops and in the handbook, about the mentoring activities found by the NSW Department of Education (2003) in their *Key Findings from the Evaluation of the Teacher Mentor Program* to be of value to mentees: ie strategies for debriefing; informal chats; demonstration lessons; classroom visits; mentor sharing resources; formal meetings. In evaluating what happened in the CIT pilot program, only four of these (debriefing; informal chats; mentor sharing resources, and formal meetings) were used extensively. CIT Respondents related more strongly to the findings of Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002; p.9), which were also provided in the workshop and the handbook.

Table Two: Mentoring Strategies (Klasen and Clutterbuck 2002; p9)

Always	Sometimes	Never
Listening with empathy	Using coaching behaviours	Discipline
Sharing experience and learning	Providing help and support	Performance management
Developing insight through reflection	Opening doors	Assessment for a third party
Being a sounding board		Supervision
Professional friendship		
Challenging		

Overview of the development of the mentoring program

Consultation

After a literature review, two levels of consultation were undertaken. Co-ordinators of mentoring programs elsewhere were engaged and discussion centred on their experiences in developing, implementing, and co-ordinating mentoring programs – what was working well and why, as well as what wasn't working well and their intended strategies for addressing these issues. Consultation was also widely undertaken within the institution itself on the potentialities of mentoring.

Avoiding Negative Outcomes

As noted above, in designing the mentoring program the designers were conscious of literature on possible negative outcomes of mentoring. Specifically, a range of potential negative outcomes were identified and a range of strategies were developed to avoid these.

Table Three: Potential negative outcomes and responses anticipated

Possible difficulties	Ways addressed in developing the program
Lack of time	At the initial workshop participants undertake an exercise to determine if they have the time to be involved in mentoring. People are asked to recommit to the program after the initial workshop.
Mismatch of professional expertise, personality	Mentoring is voluntary, and mentees are asked to identify their own mentor. If they are unable to do so they are asked to outline their learning goals, and then are given the names and details of up to three people most likely to meet their learning needs. They then choose one of these people as their mentor. Also, the preparation and negotiation phases of the mentoring relationship prepare people to identify early in a relationship if there is a mismatch. Closure strategies are also addressed in the negotiation phase of the relationship, in an attempt to ensure that a mismatch of mentor and mentee does not lead to damage in self esteem or confidence.
Lack of training/ understanding of goals/ program	The initial workshop, mentoring handbook, an optional workshop throughout the year provided mentor training.
Extra burden, responsibility	The initial workshop helps people to identify whether they are in a personal and professional position to mentor someone this year. The positive learning and personal and professional growth that are possible through reflective practice as a mentor are explored at the initial and subsequent workshops.
Frustration with mentee performance, attitude	This was discussed at the initial workshop, and strategies for addressing it were outlined.
Mentors critical, out of touch, defensive, stifling	Addressed in the initial workshop through case studies and a discussion of possible strategies. Participants were provided with outlines of positive and negative ways to address issues.
Difficulty meeting, observing, being observed	Discussed in the initial workshop and in the handbook in relation to choosing an appropriate mentor.
Lack of support, guidance, knowledge, feedback.	Addressed in the initial workshop in relation to the negotiation phase of the relationship, as well as through discussion and role plays of giving and receiving feedback.
Mentoring role unrewarded and unsupported	This is an issue with our program in that time release is not provided. There are, however other means of rewarding and supporting mentors. Mentoring is: identified as a valuable professional development activity; supervisors are advised when any of their staff become mentors; the mentoring role has high kudos within the organisation; a staff achievement award for excellence in mentoring was awarded for the first time in 2006.

Poor planning of the mentoring process	The first two phases of the mentoring program for the individuals involved are about planning: preparation & negotiation.
Few available mentors, particularly women	Mentoring is valued within the organisation, and one all staff email elicited more mentors than anticipated for the pilot program. The majority of mentor volunteers were women.
Reproduction of mentor's work style	Discussed as a possible issue in the initial workshop.
High visibility of the program – danger of high expectations for success, career advancement, the need for mentees to “perform”.	Success in this program is redefined – and is assessed as meeting the mentees' learning goals rather than career advancement. The mentee identifies these learning goals, and they are known only to the mentor and mentee.
Insufficient resources	This is a possible issue with our program because for the most part mentors are not compensated for the time they give.

Workshops and Handbook

Important components of the program are an introductory workshop and a handbook. Our initial sense that the European model of mentoring was most appropriate for the TAFE context – or at least the TAFE for which this program was developed - was reinforced by the responses of participants at the beginning of each workshop when asked to define how they would like mentoring to occur. The purpose of the introductory workshop is to outline the underpinning learner centred philosophy of the program, to explore the key issues related to mentoring, and to support mentors in identifying and developing their mentoring skills. Workshops are facilitated using a constructivist framework, and encourage critical reflection for both mentor and mentee. The introductory workshops took place in March, April and May as timing was an issue. It was intended to offer only one introductory workshop to encourage networking and support relationships between mentors, however in an institution where classes take place from 8:00 am through until 9:00 pm, finding a four hour time that most teachers can attend proved impossible. Therefore three workshops were convened and work was also undertaken with a number of mentors individually. This has resulted in three small networks rather than one larger one, and interestingly the mentors that were worked with individually have not become part of any network.

In developing the mentoring program handbook, it was intended it would be used by those mentors and mentees who had undertaken the introductory mentoring workshop. However there emerged widespread demand for the handbook from senior managers and frontline managers who had not attended the workshops. In rewriting the handbook for 2007, more information has been included to increase its usefulness as a stand alone resource.

Partnering

Most mentoring partnerships were self-selecting. It was anticipated that mentoring would be a one to one relationship, however in the workshop other possibilities were canvassed. Two mentors chose to work with a larger number of people around a very specific topic – supporting literacy in one case and online learning in the other case.

Support

It was originally intended that a number of optional workshops would be scheduled throughout the year to support mentors (and in initial workshops mentors indicated an interest in these being provided). However, in the reality of day to day work, mentors felt unable to take time out of their demanding work days for a workshop. Reflecting

this a single workshop later in the year was poorly attended. Mentors instead tended to contact the Mentoring co-ordinator for one on one discussions to work through their own individual issues with mentoring rather than to seek support or further learning in a workshop environment. Some mentors have been anxious about their mentoring skills, and have sought ongoing support, while others have asked for one off support in relation to a particular issue.

Evaluation

Sixteen mentors took part in the pilot Teacher Mentoring program. All mentors were contacted a number of times throughout the year for informal discussions about their mentoring relationship. At the completion of the pilot all mentors were given the choice of being interviewed about their mentoring experiences or filling out a questionnaire. One person chose the questionnaire and all others chose to be interviewed, with many saying that they wanted to be interviewed because their situation was “a bit different to normal”. This was seen as a very positive outcome as it suggested that participants were tailoring their mentoring relationship to meet their own needs rather than slavishly following a preconceived method.

Significantly only one mentee chose to be interviewed for the evaluation, with the others choosing the questionnaire option. This could be because most mentees did not choose to attend the initial workshop (mentors were urged more strongly than mentees to attend), and were not followed up individually throughout the year so therefore developed less of a relationship with the Mentoring Co-ordinator.

Findings and discussion

In considering the positive outcomes of this pilot mentoring program it is important to note that: it was a small pilot; the mentors were all known to the co-ordinator; and that the co-ordinator conducted the interviews for this research. Also, a large majority of the mentors who took part in the pilot had been informal mentors prior to the development of the 2006 pilot program. For the most part these mentors had very well developed mentoring skills and had a history of being sought out to provide support and advice.

Overview

Two primary issues arose in terms of mentoring experiences. Firstly, mentoring was considered a very worthwhile experience by all those involved. Secondly, there was insufficient time in reality to undertake the mentoring tasks that were identified as useful. Examples of participant reactions included:

“This is a worthwhile program. More people should take part - it is essential in these uncertain times.”

“It is a really really good idea – particularly with all the change happening now”

“This is an extremely important thing for us to do. At CIT, we have always had a mentoring culture, but this formal arrangement recognises and values mentoring. Especially now with the changing of the guard, it’s imperative. It’s not just teaching, but admin, networking, and the development of an understanding of what’s been tried before.”

“Very worthwhile program with huge positive results for each party”

“It’s a very positive way to learn”

“Mentoring encourages links across faculties and between faculties which are not usual. It breaks down walls.”

“The mentoring program supports creative development of ideas and ways of doing things”

“I needed more time”

“I did not feel that I had enough time”

“Time, time, time, time – wanted to give so much more than I had available”

On a five point scale from *very good experience* to *very poor experience* all but one mentor identified their experience of mentoring as very good. One mentor – who mentored a range of people in relation to online mentoring - rated their experience as “okay”. On the same scale, all mentees also rated their experiences in the highest two categories.

Strategies that Worked and Areas for Improvement

In all unstructured discussions comments were very positive about participants mentoring experiences. Specifically, mentees identified: feeling supported; having common employment duties; informal discussions; the chance to debrief, and the vast knowledge of their mentor. Mentors identified: keeping it informal and casual (raised by many mentors); just in time feedback; knowing that mentoring is considered as a valid and valuable activity by the organisation; knowing that support was available for the mentor; developing a closer relationship with an enthusiastic and independent colleague; working nearby to the mentee. A number of mentors noted that the experience of being a mentor had served to help them critically reflect on matters that they would otherwise not have considered (this was encouraged in the workshop and supported in one to one discussions with the co-ordinator). Others noted that they felt they had become a better teacher as a result of their mentoring. Both mentors and mentees commented positively on the lack of paperwork, with some noting that if paperwork was involved they would not have taken part in the program.

When pushed to identify what didn’t work well, mentees identified: finding the time to meet; the fear of imposing on mentors time; the need for the mentee to set up meetings; and some discussion needed more direction. Mentors identified: the (perceived) need for mentees to write down their learning goals; constant interruption when working in the same office (also identified as a positive in terms of being able to provide just in time advice and support); and the related issue of setting clear boundaries.

Almost all mentoring relationships where the mentee had identified their learning goals had successfully achieved these goals at the time of the evaluation. In the few cases where mentees chose not to identify learning goals, both parties were satisfied with the learning that had taken place as a result of mentoring.

Knowledge and Skills Developed

When asked to identify the knowledge and skills acquired in their own mentoring relationship, participants identified the following focus areas.

Table Four: Participant responses by learning area

Learning Area	% of mentors identifying	% of mentees identifying
Face to face teaching and learning	50%	**
Online & blended teaching and learning	38%	**
Flexible delivery	50%	**
Pastoral care for students	75%	33%
Administrative procedures	63%	80%
Financial procedures	13%	40%
Writing funding proposals	25%	40%
Educational leadership	38%	80%
Educational research	25%	80%
CIT policies and processes	63%	80%
Being innovative in VET	88%	60%
Developing relationships with industry/small business	13%	40%
Developing relationships with other stakeholders	25%	60%
Assessment	100%	100%
Work/life balance	50%	60%
Networking	38%	80%
Assertiveness and negotiation skills	38%	20%
Interpersonal skills	38%	40%
Managing/embracing change	38%	40%
People issues	75%	80%

***Interestingly, while teaching and learning was identified by 80% of respondents, mentees chose to combine these categories rather than address them individually (perhaps because they combine them in their teaching practice).*

All respondents identified assessment as an area of focus and people issues were also rated highly by all. It is interesting that mentors and mentees have in places identified different areas of focus. For instance, 80% of mentees have identified: educational leadership; educational research; CIT policies and processes; and networking as focus areas. These are identified much less by mentors – perhaps because mentors were more comfortable in these areas and were operating on “autopilot”, whereas they may have been quite new to mentees. Most respondents identified “being innovative in VET” as an area of focus. There may be value in undertaking further research into what respondents meant by “innovation”.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

In developing the CIT Teacher Mentor program we deliberately tried to avoid known negative outcomes of mentoring. In the evaluation each area was followed up.

Table Five: Identified negative outcomes

Possible difficulties	Outcomes
Lack of time	Lack of time was identified by almost all respondents (mentors and mentees) as an issue. Many respondents noted that release hours for mentoring would have allowed for greater learning to have occurred. People who have declined to become mentors have also raised this issue.
Mismatch of professional expertise, personality	Not identified by any of the respondents as an issue
Lack of training, understanding of goals/ program	Not identified by any of the respondents as an issue
Extra burden, responsibility	Not identified by any of the respondents as an issue, however this has been mentioned as an issue by people who have declined to become a mentor, especially from the perspective of lack of time release for mentoring.
Frustration with mentee performance, attitude	Not identified by any of the respondents as an issue, and on the contrary mentors spoke very positively about the attitude of mentees.
Mentors critical, out of touch, defensive, stifling	Not identified by any of the respondents as an issue. On the contrary all mentees spoke very highly of their mentors.
Difficulty meeting, observing, being observed	Meeting was identified as an issue in some of the mentoring relationships. This related to time constraints, and was particularly an issue if people were not on the same campus.
Lack of support, guidance, knowledge, feedback.	Participants noted high levels of support, guidance, feedback and mentor knowledge.
Mentoring role unrewarded and unsupported	A number of mentors noted that they were pleased that the organisation had a formal mentoring program which deliberately values mentoring, and there were a number of nominations for the staff achievement award for <i>Excellence in Mentoring</i> . A small amount of money was able to be provided through the Professional Development Initiatives fund for time release for mentors. While this did not recompense mentors for the actual hours that they gave to mentoring, again it served to acknowledge the role as important within the organisation.
Poor planning of the mentoring process	Not identified by any of the respondents as an issue
Few available mentors, particularly women	There were enough mentors for people seeking mentoring. Most mentors were women.
Reproduction of the mentor's work style	Not identified by any of the respondents as an issue
High visibility of the program – danger of high expectations for success, career advancement & the need for mentees to perform	In identifying their “success” respondents noted to what extent learning goals were achieved and which ones they were still working on – sometimes with the same mentor, sometimes with another mentor.
Insufficient resources	Time was an issue for most mentoring relationships.

Support and Challenge

All mentors noted that reassurance, support, and the chance to debrief, were important components of their mentoring relationship. A number of mentors and mentees noted that the mentee already had so many challenges in their lives that they did not want to be challenged by their mentor. Other partnerships saw challenge as an important component of the relationship. When asked if they would recommend the mentoring program to their friends and colleagues all mentees said that they would do so. Apart from the three mentors who have since left the CIT, only one mentor from the pilot program has elected not to be a mentor in 2007. This mentor is very time poor in 2007 and has indicated that she would like to be involved in 2008.

CONCLUSION

Participants in the pilot CIT Teacher Mentor program viewed their mentoring experiences as beneficial and supportive from both a professional learning and development perspective as well as in fostering supportive relationships. The methodology used in the development and implementation of the program, which was informed by the work of Zachary (2000 and 2005) and Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) was appropriate in this Australian TAFE environment and for the most part successfully avoided the difficulties raised by Eby, 1997; Eby et al 2000; Long 1997; and Ehrich et al 2002. The area where difficulties have occurred are in relation to time. Further work needs to be done in seeking ongoing funding to provide release hours for mentoring.

Further research needs to be done to seek a greater understanding of the learning that mentees as well as mentors have gained as a result of mentoring. We are particularly interested in looking more closely at how innovation is supported through mentoring.

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