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I can get by with a little help from my friends: Peer mentoring - critical friends for the reflective practitioner

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Abstract: As educators, our competence in being reflective practitioners is based on the belief that we have within us the ability to self review, find solutions, plan, apply and critique again. How good at all this are we? Ongoing support to sustain and build our capacity as reflective practitioners will enable us in this endeavour. Peer mentoring draws on the notion that collectively within a group of peers there is a pool of skills, experience and resources that can be used to support educators as they review their work experiences in order to develop their professional skills and competencies – “no one knows as much as all of us”. It is a powerful and enabling collegial process. It is synonymous with critical reflection and promotes a most effective professional development tool to support being a reflective practitioner. The peer mentoring process outlined here illustrates how reflective processes can unfold in the presence of others and also describes guidelines to manage the pitfalls that collaborative exchanges with peers can encounter.

Keywords: Peer mentoring, reflective practice, effective mentoring processes

Introduction

In higher education there are three stakeholders who are looking for mechanisms for maintaining standards of practice – the consumers of education, the employers and academics themselves. These stakeholders expect higher education professions to be able to self assess and monitor their own performance, learn from their mistakes, reflect on their experiences, keep themselves up to date and be lifelong learners who are accountable for their practice. Intrinsic to this is the ability to be a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983). A Reflective Practitioner is a person who can think critically about their own practice, plan change and observe the effects of the modifications in action (Boud, 1995). It is a challenging activity and educational professionals need assistance in this endeavour.

As a mechanism, mentoring has the potential to provide greater insight, awareness and ongoing learning for an individual than that which they could generate through individual self reflection on practice. In higher education, mentoring approaches to professional development activities are not new, nor is the involving of peers in processes such as peer review for assessment of research, and more recently in observation of teaching practice (Bell, 2000, 2005). Evidence of the use of peer mentoring relationships is beginning to emerge with an increasing recognition of the important role that peer groups play in the development of professionals (Austin, 2002). Although researchers, especially in the health profession, see peer mentoring as promoting joint reflection and reciprocal learning between professionals (Eisen, 2001), it is a largely untapped resource for the demanding profession of education.

Peer mentoring can be highly effective when there are structured group processes that promote critical reflection and provide opportunities for lecturers, supported by peers, to reflect on the content and process of their work that both induct participants into new ways of thinking and acting, as well as providing a means for them to transform their practice. Peer mentoring relies on creating environments where trust is implicit, where high level communication occurs and individuals are authentic, truly open and forward thinking and so ensures that the energising conversations take place. “It’s a forum within which people can find and give their own meaning to their professional and personal lives” (Heron 1999, 153).

This paper highlights peer mentoring as a mechanism to support higher education professionals in their learning from experience – the successes and the mistakes – as part of their repertoire of reflective practitioner tools. The peer mentoring processes, based on the work of John Heron (1999), that make this collaborative enterprise highly effective are then outlined. This is followed by a discussion of the distinctive features of peer mentoring that make it a powerful professional development tool for individuals and organisations. Whilst the benefits of peer mentoring are upheld the pitfalls based on our decade of experience of actively participating in peer mentoring ourselves and from training others are acknowledged. Finally, guidelines for effective peer mentoring that we have learned through the process of participation and networking with groups we have trained are presented.

Mentoring

The intention of mentoring is to be a supportive and enabling process that has as its primary goal the professional development of individuals at their own unique stage of development in order to sustain and grow high quality professional practice. Garvey and Alred (2000) contend that mentoring results in high order learning within a social context and consequently the quality of the mentoring relationship is extremely important. Mentoring relationships can take many different forms – it can be a meeting with a more experienced professional, or a group meeting facilitated by a trained mentor, or a one off meeting with a colleague or manager, or a group of peers.

Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring differs from more traditional forms of mentoring through the absence of a more qualified, identified expert – the mentor. It is based on the premise that within a group there is a pool of skills, experiences and resources that can be used to support, develop and empower one another. Various researchers have investigated a number of peer mentoring relationships (Kram, 1985; Holbeche, 1996; Heron, 1999; Seigel, 2000; Level and Mach, 2005) and have found these offer support for personal and professional development at each career stage.

The term ‘peer’ refers to colleagues of equal status – none having any power role over the other. This sense of equality contributes to the building of trust that can take some time to develop for a depth of mentoring is to be reached.

Peer mentoring is different to the valuable but informal conversations that occur as peers off load about their work and engage in supportive problem solving. Groups of individuals (usually 4-6) come together on a regular basis (usually monthly for one and a half to two hours) to review their work experiences in order to develop their professional skills and competencies. It can be comprised of individuals from the same department or organization,

or individuals from different organisations and professional disciplines. Successful peer mentoring groups require clarity of purpose, clear working agreements/guidelines, clear structures and processes that result in constructive interactions and a commitment from members to collectively maintain the quality of experience.

The peer mentoring toolkit

The peer mentoring processes are based on the peer support processes developed by John Heron (2000) with a group of general practitioners and are outlined in the New Zealand Mentoring Centre booklet (2000). These processes are highly structured to provide a framework for individuals to reflect on their work practices and enhance their ability to learn from experience. Each process tool serves a slightly different purpose and involves analysis of both successful and challenging incidents, issues and dilemmas and are designed to take approximately twenty minutes for each mentee.

The structured nature of the processes support honest and useful sharing of practice that is devoid of professional strutting or competition (Heron, 1993) and the inherent reciprocity (no one having more to gain or lose than anyone else in the process) means peer mentoring are meetings that people never want to miss.

A typical peer mentoring session has three parts:

1. It usually begins with a 'catch up' and sorting round, where group members identify their issues and a process from the toolkit for exploration, negotiate time and set an agenda.
2. Each group member takes a turn as the mentee and the others collectively become the mentor and follow the steps of the chosen process.
3. A final review of the peer mentoring session itself in order to increase the effectiveness of future sessions.

Linda Holbeche states there is an "open acknowledgement that peers can learn from one another and assist one another in issues to do with professional development, improved effectiveness and possibly even career development" (Holbeche, 1996, 24). Group member's issues, incidents or themes are explored using one of the toolkit processes, which are easy to use and very effective once a group has been trained in their use. Deep learning takes place through exploration of one's own issues as well as participation in the reflective process of others. It is often the case that you learn as much from taking part in a fellow mentee's exploration as you do from your own. The parallels between their learning and yours are astonishing – the creative process of peer mentoring appears to have an element of *magic* to it.

Peer mentoring as collaborative learning

In peer mentoring, real situations from current and recent practice are explored and provide lecturers with an opportunity to develop their analytical skills, decipher themes and patterns, and to derive a way of constructing meaning from their experience. The peer mentoring processes enable a balance and an alliance between feelings, intuition emotional skill, cognitive insights and theoretical links (Boud, 1995) and therefore can profoundly influence behaviour. These reflective skills are the key components of the peer mentoring processes. Lecturers, through the process of participation, cultivate their reflective skills, which is essential in order to encourage the development of reflective skills in their students.

Peer mentoring is ongoing in nature, which means that teachers are not isolated and having to struggle with difficulties on their own, and therefore provides increased support on the job.

The process is what Robertson (2005,76) refers to as “action learning” in that it encourages observation of practice, identification of areas for improvement through feedback and reflection, planning changes, enacting them and then again observing in order to reflect upon further change. This is aligned to the Action Research methodology.

The essential power of the peer mentoring model rests on the principle that people are self directed and self determining and that excellence in work performance is motivated from within (Heron, 1993). The self directed nature of the model means it is a very learner centred process where the locus of control lies firmly with the mentee to set their own agenda, choose the tool that the group will use for feedback, sift and sort from amongst the group responses and direct their own mentoring time. This ensures that the focus of ‘benefit for the mentee’ is maintained and that group members do not stray into meeting their own needs in another’s mentoring time. The peer mentoring model encourages self responsibility and provides tools and training for individuals in how to monitor their own performance, learn from their mistakes and be professionally accountable (Heron *ibid*).

Peer mentoring groups aim to support and develop high quality professional practice but the British National Health Service experience with peer review groups (Bond & Holland 1998) reveals that many peter out through lack of leadership, structure, group skills or motivation. Keeping the quality high is the key to peer mentoring groups lasting the distance.

Peer mentoring groups: What can go wrong?

Group based mentoring has great potential as a tool for learning but a number of things can (and will) go wrong when you gather 4-6 well intentioned people together and suggest that they mentor each other. Over the last ten years we have introduced peer mentoring to individuals from a wide range of professions and from our experience the common pitfalls of group based mentoring are listed (McNicoll & Baker, 2004).

- They can degenerate into gossip sessions, group gripes or cliques
- They can start off with a lot of commitment and enthusiasm then peter out as other demands on time take priority
- There may not be enough time to address everyone’s mentoring issues
- People may not feel safe enough to really expose their learning edges in a group setting
- There can be an over abundance of advice giving, questions or criticism, or they could become too solution focussed
- The process can become diluted, lack rigour and individuals may feel reluctant to challenge each other when necessary
- Boundaries and confidentiality may be harder to maintain as peers work alongside each other every day. Information may ‘leak’ into other processes e.g. performance appraisal settings
- Personality or group dynamics may impact on the quality of the mentoring - one individual may dominate, using all the time and others may miss out
- There can be confidential or sensitive information shared within the group that may compromise other members
- People may lose objectivity if there is considerable familiarity with each other’s work.

Guidelines for effective peer mentoring

Well described examples of peer mentoring groups are hard to find in the research literature and there is little information about what makes them effective (McNicoll & Blaiklock, 2002). From our decade of experience we have learned what factors need to be present for group

based peer mentoring to maintain their momentum and quality over time. These have been developed into the following seven guidelines which have been reinforced in our work in training others.

Guideline one: Supportive culture

There needs to be a supportive culture within the group for peer mentoring to work. The underlying assumptions that ‘people do the best they can with the resources they have’ and ‘It’s OK to make mistakes’ need to be active in a group setting due to the risk of exposure.

Guideline two: Structure

This approach to peer mentoring is highly structured. The sessions have a clear format and the group uses specific tools that are designed to promote positive mentoring outcomes. The structure supplies the direction and form and assists members to maintain appropriate boundaries. Participants on training courses initially find the discipline of the structure challenging but quickly see its effect on the quality of mentoring.

Guideline three: Place a high value on turning up

Peer group members need to display a considerable commitment to their group and give peer mentoring a high priority when organising their time, it is easy for competing priorities to override commitments to peer mentoring.

Guideline four: Make it value for time

The key to maintaining the momentum of peer mentoring over time is to ensure that the mentoring is of a consistently high quality. The use of the toolkit ensures that advice giving is avoided and that the purpose of promoting useful self reflection and learning for the mentee is maintained. Sticking to the process and participating fully will ensure that the quality is high, the process is fast and that people leave with a sense of satisfaction and a feeling of time well spent.

Guideline five: No ‘post mortems’

This is an essential ground rule for successful peer mentoring groups. It means that at the end of a process and an individual’s mentoring time is finished, there is no further discussion of the issue or practice either in the group or beyond. Members may agree to report back on an issue as a form of constructive follow up. This provides boundaries around the mentoring content and provides a high level of confidentiality. The fact that all parties are concerned with confidentiality helps in reinforcing this ground rule.

Guideline six: Voluntary participation

Peer mentoring membership should not be imposed. Its voluntary nature means that participants have to want to participate for it to work. They choose to attend and also choose what they bring to the group and how it is to be worked with.

Guideline seven: Diversity

Be alert to and respect differences in culture, gender, professional orientation etc., that may show up through differing opinions, viewpoints or ways of working. All perspectives are useful starting points for reflection. ‘You don’t get harmony if everyone sings the same note.’

If the above guidelines are followed individuals and organisations can benefit from peer mentoring. There will be increased sharing of practice throughout the organization, greater depth of understanding of each other’s work and the development and maintenance of standards of practice. In peer mentoring, the combined resources of the group can be tapped to

provide high quality mentoring for individuals and at the same time fosters interconnections between people and networks across disciplines and organisational boundaries as individuals engage in in-depth reflection on practice and develop their ability to learn from their own and others' experiences.

Conclusion

For a profession that relies on its members to be self monitoring and professional in their work peer mentoring can provide what Schon (1987) defines as 'reflection-on-action'. Peer mentoring groups facilitate learning, creativity and innovativeness for individuals and departments and are one of the few professional development tools that can address the development of emotional capabilities and intelligence. Therefore, in time reflection will become the internal dialogue that Schon (ibid) refers to as 'reflection-in-action'; that which occurs while practising and influences the moment-by-moment decisions made by practitioners.

Peer mentoring is a creative tool that is flexible enough to meet a wide variety of needs, levels, disciplines and professions. With sufficient training and preparation peer mentoring groups can provide organisations with a leading edge tool to enhance organisational learning. Used on a regular basis they will contribute to the intellectual, social and spiritual capital within the organisation and play a key role in building a learning culture, which promotes continual learning as a way of being.

Throughout this paper we have referred to lecturers and their context, but lecturer could easily be replaced with manager, administrator or any non-teaching role. Peer mentoring has the express purpose of improvement at the personal and professional level that enhances the greater purpose of educational organisations.

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