Mentoring circles in higher education

Ann Darwin and Edward Palmer

aInternational Graduate School of Business, University of South Australia, South Australia 5000; bCentre for Learning and Professional Development and Discipline of Surgery, University of Adelaide, South Australia 5005

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Traditionally, mentoring in higher education institutions has either occurred informally or as a planned program where junior staff members are matched with experienced staff members in a formal one-to-one program. While such programs have reported benefits to participants, many miss out on the opportunity. Further, mentoring dyads do little to enhance a more collaborative atmosphere in higher education settings. Alternative mentoring methods do exist and can provide advantages to the traditional approach. Mentoring circles are an innovative example of these alternative methods. The mentoring activity and subsequent evaluation described in this paper sought to explore the perceived benefits of a group mentoring model for academic staff.

Keywords: group mentoring models; higher education; mentoring circles; mentoring; staff development; team learning

Introduction

Mentoring, a process of influencing and fostering the intellectual development of students and career aspirations of staff, has long been regarded as an important adjunct to teaching within higher education (Daloz, 1986). Mentoring support is not always easy to access. Historically, Boice (1992) indicated that mentoring was available only to about one-third of new teachers in higher education faculties. More recent research suggests there has been little change in this area. A survey of US colleges in Pharmacy showed only 18% of respondents had a formal mentoring program (Wutoh et al., 2000). Additionally, Sambunjak, Straus and Marusic (2006) showed that fewer than 20% of medical faculty members had a mentor and Pololi and Knight (2005) indicated that the pressure of research, publication and clinical work affected the availability of mentors for staff in medicine. Institution-wide mentoring programs have struggled with obtaining sufficient mentors (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002) and in at least three disciplines (education, business and medicine) the lack of time to meet with a mentor is problematic (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). Women report feelings of marginalization within the political climate of the institution and are often excluded from the informal mentoring partnerships (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Gibson, 2006).

In order to make mentoring more inclusive and accessible, many in higher education institutions recommend the establishment of formal mentoring programs (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Gardiner, 2005). Most of the planned programs initiated by institutions...
of higher education use a dyadic model where a mentor (usually an experienced faculty member) is matched to the mentee (usually a junior faculty member).

Researchers in higher education have linked mentoring to career advancement (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Higgins, 2000, 2001); increased self-confidence (De Vries, 2005) and personal satisfaction and growth (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). Both mentors and mentees benefit from the mentoring relationship. Mentors describe reaping extrinsic rewards, such as accelerated research productivity, greater networking and enhanced professional recognition when mentees perform well (Johnson, 2002). The benefits for companies lie in increased retention (Payne & Huffman, 2005), greater organizational commitment (Payne & Huffman, 2005) and, for educational institutions, increased research income and publication rate (Gardiner, 2005).

There are challenges with the implementation of mentoring programs that require the matching of mentoring partners. Not everyone is a competent mentor and arranged relationships are not always ideal. Some (de Janasz, Sullivan, & Whiting, 2003) conclude that traditional mentoring programs limit participants to one person’s point of view and that aspiring academics and managers must make use of an intelligent network of multiple mentors in order to succeed in today’s rapidly changing work environment. People are now more likely to receive mentoring support from a number of different people (Darwin, 2004). The protective functions inherent in the traditional mentoring relationship may be less important for individuals today as they take on greater responsibility for their own career development. Implicit in traditional mentoring practices are unchallenged assumptions about knowledge and power. When there is a presumption of status, power and caution, as is often the case with traditional mentoring, there is limited potential for transformational change (Darwin, 2000; Diamond & Mullen, 1997). Within such frameworks learning is seen as a means of transmitting knowledge from mentor to mentee and the partnership is often protective and paternalistic. Such models may have been useful in bygone days but reproduction of the status quo is not what higher education institutions require in today’s knowledge economy.

The academic landscape is far different today than it was three decades ago when formal mentoring programs were introduced into higher education. Systems of promotion and tenure are less secure, young researchers have to win grants in order to secure ongoing employment and faculty are rewarded exclusively for funded research and publications, typically at the expense of teaching and mentoring (Altbach, 2000; Belar, 1998). It is a competitive environment, where collaboration is talked about, but more difficult to act upon; where time is such a limited commodity that only projects approved and rewarded by management are undertaken. What is needed is the development of more collaborative models to fit the contemporary landscape – more innovative and meaningful ways to develop professionally as colleagues who are equal but different (Mullen, 2000).

**Mentoring circles – a different perspective on mentoring**

Mentoring circles move away from the traditional dyadic model and, instead, use an innovative, group mentoring model. Mentoring circles typically involve one mentor working with a group of mentees or groups of people mentoring each other. They often have a facilitator to keep conversations focused and productive. Circles generate many different perspectives, with group members combining energies and experiences beyond what individual members know or contribute (Ambrose, 2003). The
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The notion of people having multiple mentors was proposed by Kram (1985) over two decades ago. She asserted that many formal programs communicate the message that one mentor relationship, rather than a network of many developmental relationships, is the key to enhancing individual development. There is now considerable evidence that individuals learn in relationships with their peers, as well as in relationships with their bosses, other senior managers and even in relationships with their direct reports (Kram, 2004).

There are many reported advantages of mentoring circles. Individuals gain access to networks, reduction in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, knowledge acquisition, better understanding of the culture and academic demystification (Darwin, 2000). Mentoring circles form part of government strategies to train staff (Spencer, 2005) and have been suggested for use in the University environment (Cook, 2005). Circles have been trialled at a leading Australian University where it was highlighted that facilitation formed a key component of this mentoring process (West, 2004). This team model of mentoring formed one of the key recommendations in a report examining mentoring strategies for the US Military (Knouse & Webb, 1998) where the benefits of team problem solving and building self-esteem were highlighted. As a peer-mentoring model, mentoring circles offer participants flexibility, diversity, knowledge creation, the ability to depend on more than one person and a system-wide view of the organization. Other reported benefits include: building confidence in the workplace; changing stereotypes in the organization; sharing personal and professional information; and closer and richer relationships (Limbert, 1995). For the organization, mentoring circles offer potential for sharing knowledge and engendering a diversity of opinion, expertise and relationship building that can better serve the constantly changing workplace. They have the potential to develop and transform the culture of workplaces, while assisting many employees with their personal development and career advancement (Darwin, 2007; Karalis, 2006).

Yet, the implementation of alternative models other than the traditional one-to-one model of mentoring is relatively rare (Darwin, 2000). Why is it that collaborative mentoring models, such as mentoring circles, are not widely implemented in higher education? Perhaps it is because the notion of mentoring dyads is the dominant mindset for most and that group mentoring models are not considered a legitimate alternative for many. Perhaps too, higher education settings are not the places where collaborative models can be successful, given the amount of competition for research grants and publications — academics are used to working alone and will only see the benefit of collaborative models if there is senior management recognition. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore these issues and make recommendations to the Institution for further study and future implementation.

Mentoring circles at the University of Adelaide

In 2006 a mentoring circle program was instigated at the University of Adelaide and twenty participants were involved over a 6-month period. The purpose of the circles was to provide assistance to new faculty, including advice, social support and to share information about the workings of the Institute. The mentoring circles consisted of six to eight members who made a commitment to meet eight times for two hours over a period of six months. Participants included experienced and new faculty members.
from Health Science, Law and Commerce Faculties. Membership of the circles was intended to be voluntary. Each circle had an ‘outside’ facilitator who maintained the focus of the group, promoted discussion and ensured equal participation.

Group 1 consisted of six staff from the Law and Commerce Faculties. Included in the circle were two mentors, an experienced Professor from Law and one from Commerce. Initially there were to be nine members but three failed to start due to scheduling issues. Topics were largely generated by junior staff and there was a great deal of input from the two mentors. One of the participants agreed to act as coordinator to remind people of meetings and set up any refreshments required.

Group 2 consisted of eight staff from Health Science. It was a diverse group of six women and two men. One of the men left the program mid-way through due to work commitments. Perhaps due to the fact that the participants were mainly women, two of whom were pregnant throughout the 6-month period, many of the topics were about life/work balance. Although there were junior and senior academics, no-one acted as mentor for the circle, with support and encouragement coming from all circle members. The coordinator for this group was outside the circle.

Group 3 consisted of six staff from Health Science. It was a diverse group, containing junior researchers and clinicians as well as more experienced, senior members of staff. One of the participants also acted as coordinator. Topics were chosen and ground rules were set, however, about mid-way through the program it was obvious that there was little commitment from most members for the process of group learning. Hence, this group chose to end the circle meetings after five sessions – three sessions less than planned.

During the first few meetings group members established guidelines for working together as well as expectations, outcomes, goals, roles and responsibilities. The circles took on a topic-based learning approach. Topics were initiated by participants and included career, leadership and personal issues. Some of the topics chosen for discussion are displayed in Table 1.

**Evaluation process**

As the common implementation for mentoring is the dyadic model, there was concern that participants may approach the mentoring circles with a bias against them. If this was the case, it was important to address these concerns quickly. The motivation for joining the circles was important, as were the perceived outcomes of being part of the mentoring process. These were both unknown quantities, which would have significant bearing on the way the groups would function. Given that time management is a critical issue in many areas, it was important to determine if the participants felt that the time allocated for the circles was reasonable. Participants were therefore asked to complete a survey on mentoring at the commencement and completion of the program. To aid confidentiality, the survey results were not sorted by group. Focus groups were carried out at the end of the facilitation period to explore issues raised by the surveys. Organizers of groups who planned to continue the mentoring process were interviewed six months later in order to determine mid-term effects of the mentoring circle program.

**Survey results**

The survey focused on several different aspects of the mentoring program. Participants were asked why they attended, if they would have preferred one-to-one mentoring,
whether the frequency of meetings was appropriate, why they were involved, what
they hoped to achieve and how they would know if the mentoring circle had been
successful.

The participants involved in the mentoring circle appeared to be present willingly,
although 15% were ‘invited’ to participate from their Head of School or other person,
and one response implied a level of coercion triggered their involvement. From the
responses, three major themes arose (Figure 1):

- an interest in developing mentoring skills, possibly implying some level of
  seniority;
- a desire to benefit from the experiences of others. This reason dominated the
  responses and was illustrated by respondents saying that they wanted to gain a
  better life/work balance, develop their careers and professional lives and to
  make the transition from student to academic researcher. Research was a strong
  theme throughout the responses to all questions. Teaching was rarely
  mentioned;
- a desire to investigate methods of mentoring

The mentoring circle was to meet every three weeks for two hours. The majority
of participants were happy with this proposed schedule. There was no suggestion that
this was too infrequent, with 30% suggesting that longer timescales would be more

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Table 1. Topics generated by mentoring groups, sorted by theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do we develop better grants?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to improve our interactions with and between students?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we judge if our research is a flyer or not?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I publish strategically?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are our community contributions?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are our services to the University?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I succeed as a grant-funded scientist?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the University work? What behaviours get rewarded?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are people’s career stories and their career aspirations?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you know when you are doing OK?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does it take to be an effective leader at the University?</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we develop research relationships through networking?</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we collaborate on research projects?</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to work across disciplines and network?</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I work with a leader I do not respect?</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can someone be a successful academic and work from 9–5?</td>
<td>Life/work balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we make the University a life-friendly workplace?</td>
<td>Life/work balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I balance career and family?</td>
<td>Life/work balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I better manage my time?</td>
<td>Life/work balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we set up mentoring relationships?</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I get the guidance I want?</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes a good mentor?</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
appropriate. After the mentoring period, a larger percentage of the group felt that a monthly schedule would be more appropriate, although more than half felt that the original schedule was acceptable (Figure 2).

Prior to the commencement of the mentoring circles, participants perceived that major benefits of the mentoring circle might be career benefits, new insights and contact with others. One participant suggested that it would be a means to ‘break the isolation’ suggesting that, for this person at least, a group environment was very important. Many other varied responses were noted, including wanting to be inspired, hearing from people at different stages of their careers and the opportunity to learn from the more experienced. More than 20% of the participants did not know
what they would gain from the process. At the end of the mentoring period, the group felt that interacting with others and sharing experiences were the largest benefit (Figure 3).

When asked how they would decide if the mentoring circles had been successful, the participants judged, pre-mentoring, that it would be successful if they gained new skills, established new relationships and had a greater ability to meet career or institutional goals, including completing professional development and gaining promotion (Figure 4). Post-mentoring, there had been a shift towards establishing new relationships as the benchmark for a successful mentoring circle program. Most participants

Figure 3. Perceived benefits of mentoring circles.

Figure 4. Benchmarks of success of the mentoring circle.
commented that success could only be measured in the long-term for a program such as this.

Focus group results
At the end of the formal facilitation of the mentoring circles, members were invited to attend a focus group to discuss the effectiveness of the circles. Nine members attended, representing 45% of the total participants. There were representatives from all groups. The group that disbanded early (Group 3) also participated in a separate focus session with the facilitator to discuss the lack of success with that circle.

The focus group felt that mentoring circles were a valid method to be used for mentoring at the University, but recognized that time was an important issue. It was hard to find the time to attend, but more importantly it was very difficult to schedule the mentoring circle for the group. The consensus from the focus group was that once-a-month was a good schedule for the mentoring circle to meet.

The need for personalities to be compatible and the group size were raised as important issues. The focus group felt that a minimum of eight and a maximum of thirteen members were manageable. They also felt that being cross-disciplinary in membership was an important requirement. Group 3 agreed that the cross-disciplinary nature of the group was a positive aspect. Members of the group said ‘you cannot put people together in a formal/targeted way and expect that there will be quality relationships. Mentoring occurs informally and that’s the way it should remain.’ They also said ‘personalities were not quite right’.

Motivation was considered an important factor by the focus group. The facilitator noted that some people didn’t really want to be there and that other reasons might be necessary to encourage participation. One person suggested the need to ‘tie mentoring to another aspect of the job such as promotion, grant applications.’

The general consensus was that mentoring circles worked well within the University of Adelaide context. According to participants, benefits included: gaining different perspectives, learning from others, hearing opinions from those more senior in the organization and meeting people you wouldn’t normally meet. Of particular interest were the comments relating to feelings of isolation: ‘there is a need for activities such as this as departmental tea rooms have been removed where once these discussions could have taken place’. As mentioned by one participant, a key benefit was: ‘knowing you were not alone’. There is evidence to suggest that mentoring circles have the potential to break down these feelings of isolation. One person stated: ‘Relationships have changed within the group; [I] now feel comfortable to chat with other group members outside the group’.

Different themes were discussed, such as time management, promotion and collaborative research, and focus group members noted that having themes was important to the circles success. The themes often arose from the group. The sharing of stories and paths through careers, common frustrations and common barriers were helpful conversations to share with colleagues. Group 3 made the following comments, suggesting that themes were not instigated or followed through effectively: ‘No-one knew what they were doing’ and ‘They had trouble defining what they are doing’. When it came to promoting mentoring circles, members felt that a concrete list of topics and a source for information was essential. Notes were sent out to group members after each session and this was considered useful.
Focus group members recognized the advantages of mentoring circles for both individuals and the organization and that a concerted effort would be required to ensure the continuation of these circles into the future. Groups 1 and 2 would continue to meet with an elected coordinator to motivate and organize the group. The consensus was to meet less frequently but it was important to remain in touch with each other and continue the dialogue.

*Six months later*

Of the three mentoring circles, two groups informed organizers that they would continue to run their circles, albeit less frequently. Both groups were contacted and the organizer interviewed to measure how the groups were functioning away from experienced facilitation. Group 2 had not yet scheduled a meeting. The elected coordinator of this circle did believe that the job was important but had not yet organized a circle meeting. Items such as scheduling, venue, and a plan for the circle were deemed important and difficult to resolve. The coordinator felt that if the group had its schedule managed by a third party, the circle would meet.

The elected coordinator of Group 1 contacted all members of the original group four months after the last facilitated meeting and also contacted all academics in her discipline. The group had met with nine additional members and had received encouragement from high levels. The coordinator felt that additional support may be required if there is difficulty facilitating discussion, especially in a larger group.

*Discussion and conclusion*

The purpose of this study was to explore the benefits of mentoring circles for academics at the University of Adelaide. Twenty academics agreed to meet eight times over a period of six months as part of a peer mentoring program. Three mentoring circles were formed with members from a variety of disciplines. Results indicated that two circles had successful outcomes and one was unsuccessful. The time allocated for the mentoring circles seemed to be appropriate and many of the participants benefited from working in a collaborative atmosphere. This latter point was deemed by the participants to be a benchmark of success after the program had completed. An additional measure of success was determined by the commitment of circle members to stay with the trial program and to continue meeting, without the support of a facilitator, after the end of the program. One of the three groups had done this, with increased members, one group planned to continue, but required administrative assistance and the last group dissolved at the end of the program.

This study shows that the mentoring circles worked for those who felt comfortable in a collaborative group environment and not for those who felt uncomfortable sharing information with colleagues who have different personalities, values, and motives from themselves. Apart from the obvious disadvantage that individuals don’t have as much one-to-one contact with a mentor, not everyone enjoys group learning and sharing and some may even dislike group activities intensely. Some of these factors were important in the failure of Group 3 as a viable mentoring circle. After the first few sessions it became clear that a number of different personalities were more interested in asserting themselves over the group than becoming part of the group. This led to a reticence to open up and share their views with others. It was more of a competition between individuals than a collaborative, supportive learning environment. The facilitator tried
strategies to develop group cohesiveness. For instance, one session was held in a social venue outside of the Institution. Eventually it was unanimously agreed to end the mentoring sessions. This agreement was amicable.

Mentor circle success factors need to include: a commitment to attend; confidentiality; rapport between circle members; and voluntary attendance. Hence, mentoring circles need to be seen as one of a number of developmental activities offered within higher education. This has implications for future mentoring programs, especially in the formation of mentoring circles. It needs to be made clear that mentoring circles are one of a number of activities to support staff and that potential participants need to feel comfortable with working in groups. Further, that participation must be voluntary. In this study, 15% of participants said they were ‘invited’ to attend, indicating a degree of coercion.

This study supported the views of Kram (2004) and Limbert (1995) that individuals learn in relationships with their peers, bosses, other senior managers and subordinates. Further, that closer and richer relationships occur within group mentoring settings. Mentoring circles provide a place to discuss real issues relating to work, career and family with like-minded people. Group mentoring models facilitate interaction between different departments and provide greater opportunities to develop relationships (Cook, 2005; Spencer, 2005; West, 2004).

Studies (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Sambunjak et al., 2006) showed that one of the main functions of mentoring has been career development and this was the initial motivation for participants for joining the circles. What they said post-program was that the greatest benefits came from interacting with others and sharing experiences. During the focus group session a major theme from participants was the growing isolation that occurred at the University and there was nostalgia from some for ‘the good old days’ when academics used to interact with each other more often. Senior managers need to take this finding into account.

If institutes of higher education want to encourage collaboration between faculties, their support for activities such as this one is likely to be beneficial for the organization as well as staff and students. This can be through senior staff participating in the mentoring circles, monetary support and career advancement opportunities by participating and by showcasing and displaying visible support to the process. Group 1 was cross-disciplinary in nature and had two senior academic members, one from each discipline and it may be that this senior level support encouraged greater organization and discussion. Strong discussion themes appear to have assisted in the bonding process and common topics that went past faculty borders were discussed.

It is not possible to generalise the results from this study across working environments and the general population, but in this situation there were tangible benefits for participants and the institution from this mentoring activity. Career and skill development did not emerge as an important benefit of mentoring circles. This is likely due to the recognition that benefits such as promotion or increased research output are likely to be long-term. Future studies that explore the benefits of mentoring circles in higher education will require ongoing organization, evaluation and administrative support over a 2–3-year period. Clearly, there are short-term benefits of group mentoring, namely increased networking, psychosocial support and a great deal of role modelling that occurs between senior and junior members of faculty. A major concern is that result-oriented organizations may not perceive these benefits as valuable enough to fund ongoing programs and this will be an ongoing challenge for those involved in such staff and organizational development activities.
References


