

ASCILITE community mentoring program: Empowering members through cross institutional partnering

Geraldine Lefoe

Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources

University of Wollongong

Helen Carter

Network for Innovation in Teaching and Learning

University of Newcastle

Mike Keppell

Centre for Integrating Technology in Education

Hong Kong Institute of Education

Mike Fardon

The Multimedia Centre, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Western Australia

Craig Zimitat

Griffith Institute for Higher Education

Griffith University

The executive of ASCILITE introduced a mentoring program in 2003 to facilitate the sharing of the skills and knowledge of the ASCILITE membership, particularly in the areas that would enhance learning through technology. The program also recognised the expertise of the professional membership of ASCILITE by inviting them to act as mentors in the program. These were often long term members with some former members of the Executive. The program is unique as it recognises that mentoring is beneficial to both less experienced professionals in the field as well as experienced educational technologists who are making career changes within their institution and across institutions. The program focussed on the achievement of one identified goal within a specified period. The evaluation of the pilot program indicated that participants found the program beneficial particularly in the exchange of ideas, dialogue and communication that occurred. In addition the evaluation by the mentors-mentees and the organising committee suggested a number of recommendations to improve the program. These included: setting an achievable goal, identifying agreed outcomes and roles, developing a timeline, scheduling regular meetings, and planning to attend the annual conference. These recommendations are currently being implemented in the second year of the program.

Keywords: mentors, higher education, faculty development, leadership, professional associations

Introduction

The Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) initiated a pilot mentoring scheme titled 'Community Mentoring Program' (CMP) in 2003, under the leadership of a subgroup of the Executive committee as a proactive initiative for members of the society. Mentoring, for the purpose of the program, was defined as "a collaboration between two ASCILITE members for the purpose of achieving an agreed goal through dialogue and reflection" (ASCILITE, 2003). The program aimed to recognise the expertise of existing members and to foster members new to roles in the educational technology field. The program is unique as it recognises that mentoring is beneficial to both less experienced professionals in the field as well as experienced educational technologists who are making career changes within their institution and across institutions.

A team from the ASCILITE executive conceptualised the program, managed the program, processed applications, selected candidates, and completed an initial evaluation. The participants were recruited from the ASCILITE membership by advertising in the newsletter and through the ASCILITE listserver. Application forms for both mentor and mentee requested potential candidates to provide sufficient information so that mentoring program team could identify partnerships that may be compatible and

conducive to a successful mentor-mentee relationship. The mentoring program team judged the applications to determine who would receive the sponsorship. The aim was to culminate the program at the annual ASCILITE conference with a breakfast session to informally evaluate the program and introduce to the program to potential applicants for the following year.

Five mentees were matched with mentors who had the skills required to support them to achieve their goals for the six month period. The mentor and mentee determined what they aimed to achieve and how they would do this. They determined the frequency of meeting and methods of communication. They were mutually responsible for its success. The goals they identified included:

- developing a survey instrument to evaluate the impact of the institution's Learning Management System;
- applying professional project management software tools for managing educational development projects;
- developing an understanding of the role of the instructional designer for a novice designer;
- acquiring the skills to produce a refereed journal article; and
- improving the use of online discussion in teaching.

Mentors were chosen based on their expertise, appropriate skills match for the mentee from those who had applied to participate or were approached by a member of the sub-group where no applicant matched the desired skill base. All participants were provided with a \$500 honorarium to support the process.

Each mentor-mentee partnership signed an agreement indicating the goals to be achieved, methods of communication and an agreed timeline for meetings. This was filed with the ASCILITE secretariat and the honorarium was provided after receipt of the agreement. A facilitator was identified for each pair from the executive sub-group. The role of the facilitator was as an intermediary if problems arose in the relationship.

This paper reviews the current literature related to mentoring in higher education, examines the initial CMP program through data collected from the participants, and makes recommendations for improvements to the program.

Literature review

The benefits of mentoring in the corporate sector have long been recognised (Kram, 1986; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Mentoring has been conceived as a way to strengthen organisations through the empowerment of junior staff and through the reinvigoration of more senior staff. Indeed, organisations with mentoring programs are perceived as more effective and collaborative (Murray, 1991); and reflect an organisational belief that people are critical to the business (Luna & Cullen, 1995). Furthermore Kram (1983) identified two main functions of a mentoring relationship: career advancement, such as sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection and the provision of challenging assignments; and psychosocial functions, involving role modelling, acceptance and confirmation, counselling and friendship. Mentoring is seen as mutually beneficial for the individuals involved (Kram, 1983; Levinson et al., 1978).

Formal mentoring programs conceived in the corporate sector initially were slow to gain ground in higher education institutions although increased agendas for accountability and quality assurance have seen universities take a more corporate view of staff development in recent years, including an increased use of mentoring for all staff (Luna & Cullen, 1995). In higher education, successful mentoring programs have been reported for undergraduate and postgraduate students (Hawkridge, 2003; Sinclair, 2003), for administrative staff (Barnett, 1995; Daresh, 1995), for new faculty (Cawyer, Simonds, & Davis, 2002; Sands, Parson, & Duane, 1991) and for faculty taking on new roles, especially using technology (Gray & McNaught, 2001).

Mentoring has been well reported for students and recent studies point to mentoring programs developed for undergraduates, particularly in teacher education areas (Barnett, 1995; Bush & Coleman, 1995) and health education (Oliver & Aggleton, 2002). In addition the usefulness of technology (particularly online communication technologies) for mentoring of junior students by more senior students in the areas of

teaching (Hearne, Lockyer, Rowland, & Patterson, 2004) and nursing (Ribbons & Hornblower, 1998) highlight the benefits of mentoring and the usefulness of technology to support the process.

Of significance to this study, Peluchette & Jeanquar (2000) examined whether career professionals require different sources of mentors at different stages of their careers through a sample of 430 faculty members from two US research institutions. The researchers pointed out that “professionals must align themselves very closely with their professional colleagues and associations outside the organisation for the purposes of recognition, evaluation, and in some cases, career mobility” (p. 551), a notion supported by earlier work by Raelin (1985) and Becher (1989). Peluchette & Jeanquar (2000) found that early career professionals particularly benefited from multiple sources of mentoring, both within their organisation and within their profession, and that those without mentors may limit their career success. They concluded that the profession is an important source of mentoring for early career professionals but may have limited impact on mid-career and late career professionals, where mentoring within their organisation may prove more beneficial. However, Sands and associates (1991) cautioned earlier about the impact of a mentor drawn from within an institution where the person involved may have an impact on future promotion or tenure and suggest that mentors should be drawn from outside the immediate department.

Mentoring within and by higher education professional associations has not received as much attention in the research area, although some studies conducted in health and library associations highlight the benefits for the participants and the association. One study of particular relevance, by Ritchie and Genomi (2002) recognised that the concept of professionalism should be added to Kram’s (1983) career advancement and psychosocial functions. Ritchie and Genomi’s (2002) evaluative study identified the important role group mentoring has to support the “emerging professional identity” of individuals in professional associations (p. 68). This suggests an important role for professional associations which requires further research.

Method

A case study methodology was used to review the inaugural mentoring program in 2003, which involved ten participants. The research questions were directly related to the goals of the program to determine the extent to which they had been achieved. They included:

What opportunities has the program provided for participants?

What are the benefits for ASCILITE?

What are the perspectives of participants of the success of the program?

How can the program be improved?

Multiple sources of information were used for data collection. Data was collected through an anonymous online survey, involving twelve 6 – point Likert style questions with choices from strongly agree to strongly disagree. There was also opportunity to indicate if a statement was not applicable or if the respondent had a neutral response. There were six open ended questions. The limited number of subjects is acknowledged with 7 of a possible 10 respondents completing the questionnaire. Each mentoring pair also provided a written report. A forum was conducted during the annual conference in December, 2003 and mentors, mentees, and facilitators of the program were invited to attend. Attendance included one mentee or mentor from three partnerships plus written reports from the two pairs unable to attend.

The small number of participants in the questionnaire means that results cannot be generalised beyond this particular program. In addition, no statistical analysis of results was conducted because of the small numbers involved.

Results of pilot program

There were seven responses to an anonymous online questionnaire with responses from three mentors and four mentees. Respondents to the questions related to the benefits of the program for mentees indicated neutral responses for three questions, possibly an indication that the program was too new to determine its effects as yet, though three of the seven thought it provided opportunity for enhancing the development of communication and interpersonal skills. The program was seen more positively in terms of benefits for

mentors with three agreeing that mentors developed personal satisfaction through opportunity to share knowledge and expertise and through recognition for their skills and experience. Four respondents indicated they thought the program enhanced the development of communication and interpersonal skills for mentors. For the benefits for ASCILITE, four felt the scheme could attract new members, six felt it would encourage retention of experienced and skilled members and three felt ASCILITE would benefit through the development of future leaders.

The open ended questions provided more depth to the responses. A question regarding the success of the program elicited positive responses from all respondents, with one respondent stating:

... through the mentoring process itself, and through the network and relationships opened through the program, my knowledge of Instructional Design has increased dramatically. It has also benefited both organisations through cross transfer of knowledge and processes about Instructional Design. The mentoring partnership will continue, although the program is near completion.

Another participant also indicated flow on effects for their organisation, since their institution was “just commencing an initiative which the mentee's institution had been doing for a while”. One participant indicated, “I've enjoyed it. I think that, once a few communication issues are refined, it could evolve into a very significant activity.” The most significant aspect of the program was the cross institutional collaboration for four respondents, and professional engagement for two others. One enjoyed the opportunity to give something back to the profession. All indicated they would be interested in acting as mentors in future programs, though some did not feel ready for the challenge immediately.

Respondents offered some insight into possible improvements for the program including one suggestion for making the financial incentives tax free, another for increasing communication between all mentors and mentees in the program, and one who thought the program should be more structured and another who thought it should be less structured.

The reports from the partnerships provided further insight to the program. Communication for the program was conducted through a variety of means, not surprisingly with much of it involving technology as the partners were in different institutions or organisations, in different states and in two cases, different countries. Two pairs had the benefit of face to face meetings, supported by email and chat, and indicated that this assisted to develop their relationships. One pair knew each other professionally before the program and so already had an informal relationship. They communicated by phone regularly and supported this with email and one chat session. Two pairs communicated only by email or chat and they indicated some difficulties in forming a strong relationship and maintaining communication.

Opportunities for participants and perspectives of success

All participants agreed the initial CMP program provided opportunities for growth and development for both mentors and mentees, though it was obviously more successful for some partnerships than others. Specifically benefits for mentees may take some time to be obvious, and certainly, the four month timeframe limited this opportunity. Early work by Kram (1983) indicates that there are four phases of development in mentoring relationships: initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition. However, her study was based on mentoring relationships that were on average five years in length and where the partners were based in the same organisation. In this timeframe some of the partnerships were still in early stages of development, while others may have been facing the challenges often experienced when a mentoring relationship ends, that is feelings of anger, loss or abandonment (Kram & Isabella, 1985). One partnership indicated in their final report that the mentoring would continue in an informal way, despite the achievement of an identified goal. However, another indicated, “The short time frame does not allow for data to be collected, collated, related to a literature review and then be written up for paper publication” and so “The paper for publication will have to be done outside the CMP”, an indication that the partnership was unlikely to continue.

Communication issues were more challenging in this cross institutional context particularly where partners were located in other states or countries. Whilst pairs who had met previously or had opportunity to meet face to face appeared to be more successful, the use of technology and an intermediary may assist to develop relationships in the initiation stage. One participant commented:

The idea of virtual mentoring / mentoring at a distance was technically very achievable, but I don't think I would have found it engaging if conducted solely via Internet; the telephone conversations were most worthwhile and a welcome break from the screen.

Other research has viewed the use of technology more positively in the area of mentoring, but much of the focus has been on mentoring relationships between student/teacher involved in higher education study (Kealy & Mullen, 2003). The program may benefit from further encouragement and support for participants through the contact with other mentoring partnerships and for further contact with the facilitator, using email or a listserv.

Two other important issues are relevant to the discussion. Firstly, the timeline for the mentoring program although expected to be six months, was actually only four months by the time some partnerships had made contact as several mentors were at overseas conferences when the initial announcement was made. Consequently, the ability to fully achieve the goals identified was limited, and in some cases, the goal was renegotiated to allow for the limited timeframe. Some partnerships extended the program for another three months after the questionnaire was conducted in order to achieve their goals. Secondly, only three mentors and one mentee were able to attend the conference. For the mentors the issue was related to commitments elsewhere, but for the mentees both costs to attend and approval from supervisors were limitations. Even the mentee who attended only gained approval one week before the conference. It is important therefore to raise the profile of the program itself as well as the successful candidates within their institution, to ensure support from management for their attendance at the conference. This may require official invitations to the conference; for example, indicating the presence of the candidate is invited for an awards ceremony.

Benefits for ASCILITE

The benefits for ASCILITE will take some time to emerge, despite the positive comments from the participants. The program does provide an opportunity to raise the profile within the participants' institutions. For example, one participant stated "The mentoring partnership has been a fantastic professional development opportunity. Other instructional designers and managers at [my workplace] have asked me about ASCILITE, and have expressed interest in being involved in the next round of the Community Mentoring Program." In addition, two of the partnerships indicated benefits of the mentoring relationship for their institution or firm. One indicated, "a relationship has been forged between [my workplace] and [mentor's workplace] that can be developed." Highlighting the benefits to the organisation of the mentoring partnerships may support the mentee's attendance at the annual conference.

Recommendations for improvements

In order to improve the program during 2004 the following recommendations for future partnerships were identified:

Set an achievable goal

Some mentees set goals that were not achievable within the timeframe with workload often meaning the Program becoming a lower priority. One mentee for example identified an outcome of a refereed journal article but this included planning the research, data collection and analysis, literature review etc. The result was the research was well underway but the paper is still to be written. A more achievable goal would have been to develop and implement the research plan in the time available. If the outcome is to be a research paper then the research should be well underway.

Agree on outcomes and roles

Roles clarification is required for the initial meeting, in conjunction with the facilitator from the Executive sub-group. The role of the facilitator has been clarified to include support for the development of a statement of agreed goals between the participants and regular contact with them during the mentoring process. There should be outcomes for the mentor and the mentee. Identifying these can benefit both parties.

Create a timeline

Successful projects planned a timeline of steps required to achieve their goal. When other issues impede progress participants may need to renegotiate the agreement.

Plan for regular communication

Participants planned regular meetings and agreed on communication methods. For example one pair found regular timetabled telephone meetings more beneficial than using chat facilities. This was supported by email communication. Others found a combination of face to face meetings and email most useful. Participants also indicated they would like opportunity to share their progress with other recipients through the Virtual Conferencing System. Where communication becomes problematic, the participants need to be made aware that the facilitator could be included in a discussion on ways to improve it.

Plan to attend the annual conference

Unfortunately, only one mentee was able to attend the conference. Whilst mentees and mentors receive an honorarium of \$500 mentees will receive additional support through the provision of a complimentary registration for attendance at the annual conference in 2004. Opportunity for an introduction to the ASCILITE community and the networking benefits for mentees are seen as highly beneficial.

Future directions

The CMP program continued in 2004 with five new mentoring partnerships, each facilitated by a member of the Executive sub-group managing the process. In addition to the honorarium, mentees were provided with free registration for the annual conference in an effort to increase opportunity for them to network with other members of the association. Ongoing evaluation will determine whether improvements to the 2004 program, as indicated from the current research, provide a more effective program for participants.

Further research is required in the area of mentoring in professional associations. In particular, this program would benefit from a longitudinal study to determine the impact of the program on the participants and to determine what benefits the association receives from sponsoring such a program.

The final words about the benefits of the 2003 program come from the participants in the further comments section of the questionnaire, indicating the potential for the Community Mentoring Program.

My mentor was fantastic - he went out of his way to pull me into his organisation's activities and communities of practice that I hadn't ever experienced before.

Enjoyed the renewed passion for our field. The enthusiasm the mentees bring is infectious
The CMP is a symbol of a forward looking professional organisation. Great stuff.

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Geraldine Lefoe, Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources, University of Wollongong, NSW Australia 2522. glefoe@uow.edu.au

Helen Carter, Network for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, University of Newcastle. helen.carter@newcastle.edu.au

Mike Keppell, Centre for Integrating Technology in Education, B4-P-02F. Hong Kong Institute of Education. 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po New Territories Hong Kong. keppell@ied.edu.hk

Mike Fardon, The Multimedia Centre, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Western Australia, Australia. michael.fardon@uwa.edu.au

Craig Zimitat, Griffith Institute for Higher Education, Social Sciences Bldg, Mt Gravatt Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. c.zimitat@griffith.edu.au

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