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Reflections on the mentoring process with academics entering a “new” educational experience

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Purpose – Increasingly, academics new to higher education find themselves in a “publish or perish” environment, with little if any formal or informal support structures. This is a situation that many academics have faced and lamented. The discussion in this paper emanates from the objective of seeking to change this environment. The mentoring provided an opportunity to work collaboratively with accounting academics who are new to the higher education sector, and focuses on developing and/or enhancing a scholarly approach to teaching and learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The reflective practitioner model provides the theoretical framework that underpins this mentoring process. The discussion in this research paper provides an opportunity to explore this mentoring process, primarily aimed at developing and encouraging a scholarly approach to teaching and learning by academics new to the environment. Data on the process were collected using a survey questionnaire and as a result of informal discussions during the mentoring process.

Findings – The findings indicate an overall positive response to the process for both the mentor and the mentee and the achievement of the planned research outcomes.

Originality/value – The discussion in this paper outlines a framework and process that others may follow when mentoring academics entering a “new” educational experience.

Keyword(s): Mentoring; Accounting; Higher education; Teaching; Learning.

Introduction

This paper is the result of a mentoring project undertaken at the school level, aimed at developing a scholarly approach to teaching and learning with academics entering a new educational experience.

A common criticism by staff is the lack of guidance and mentoring afforded to new researchers in higher education (HE). From the experience of the mentor in this project, engaging new researchers in a collaborative manner has not been a key feature of the school's culture. The result has been a school that relies heavily on a very small number of researchers, mainly of professorial status who, as evidenced by their position, have already achieved recognition as established researchers. For academics new to the school or those

now in a position to focus on research activities, the road is uncertain, and for some, seemingly daunting.

It is within this context that this research group was established and the process of informal mentoring begun. (The Appendix profiles staff involved in the mentoring group.)

Improving accounting education

Concerns about the quality of accounting education at the international level were detailed in the reports of the Accounting Education Change Commission (1990) in the USA. At the national level, the report of the review of the accounting discipline in Australia by the then Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET, 1990) detailed similar concerns.

The Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) was established as a result of issues of concern with the quality of accounting education and accounting graduates raised in two defining reports about accounting education in the USA –the American Accounting Association's (AAA's) 1986 Bedford Report (American Accounting Association Committee on Future Structure Content and Scope of Accounting Education (Bedford Committee) (1986)) and the report issued by the chief executives of the Big 5 (then Big 8) accounting firms (Arthur Andersen & Co. *et al.*, 1989). Both reports were critical of a tertiary accounting education process that graduated students lacking many of the attributes and skills deemed essential in the contemporary business environment. Although US based, these reports have been viewed subsequently as having relevance to the development and improvement of accounting programs in other parts of the world, including Australasia (Carr and Mathews, 2002).

In Australia, a discipline review of accounting education commenced in March 1989 and covered accounting programs in 49 government-funded HE institutions which made up the then binary system of HE. The findings of the review were published in *Accounting in Higher Education: Report of the Review of the Accounting Discipline in Higher Education* (DEET, 1990) commonly referred to as The Mathews Report. The findings of the Mathews Report are described as a “litany of woe” by Macve (1992, p. 29), who cites long periods of chronic neglect of the discipline, inadequate resourcing and discriminatory funding by institutions, resulting in the diversion of resources from the accounting discipline to other disciplines, and increasing staff to student ratios. In another comment on the Mathews Report, Tippet (1992) appears equally concerned, referring to the plight of accounting education in Australia.

As global criticism of accounting education continued, accounting education research expanded, primarily focussed on pedagogic issues of quality, such as the design, content, assessment and delivery of accounting education courses and programs. In particular, research about teaching methods in accounting education was popular during the 1990s (Cooper, 2001). This research revolved around the desire to improve the quality of teaching and learning in universities and, for many disciplines, a body of empirical research is now available to support this endeavour. However, the effectiveness of this research in achieving significant and pervasive changes in accounting programs is questioned in a recent, extensive review of accounting education in the USA (Albrecht and Sack, 2000, p. 4). These findings are consistent with those of Adler *et al.* (2000) who concluded that impediments to the development of learner-centred approaches to accounting education in Australia and New

Zealand have restricted any real or substantial change in the design of undergraduate accounting programs.

The impediments are defined by these authors as a lack of student readiness, inadequate educator support mechanisms and non-reflective teacher practices (Adler *et al.*, 2000, p. 113). While academics may have little control over the first two listed impediments (student readiness and educator support) it is the third listed impediment (non-reflective teacher practices) over which they do have control. For this reason it is of particular interest to the mentoring process described in this paper.

Adler *et al.* (2000) describe some indicative practices of non-reflective educators. These include: failure to read the literature; failure to collect usable student feedback for improvement; and failure to break the mould of “teaching as we were taught”. The authors argue that positive and sustainable improvements in accounting education may only be progressed if a more vigorous and proactive approach is taken to the change agenda. This proactive approach necessitates the development of a scholarly approach to teaching and learning by all academics, that may be evidenced by activities such as reading and understanding the relevant literature, collecting and acting on student feedback and recognising that the higher education sector today is vastly different from that of the past. This is particularly so as global, mass education has fundamentally changed the student cohorts that now enrol in accounting education programmes. As a consequence, there is a requirement to re-evaluate our teaching and learning practices.

The mentoring process described in this paper is presented as one example of a vigorous and proactive approach to promoting change and improvement in accounting education. To recall, an important goal of the process is to develop a scholarly approach to teaching and learning with academics entering a new educational experience.

Mentoring

Perceptions of mentoring vary and as a consequence, there are different ways of conducting and participating in a mentoring process (Shea, 1992). Similarly, the role of the mentor has been referred to in a variety of contradictory terms that have included “an ambiguous authority figure” (Stodgill cited in Clutterbuck, 1991), “an interpersonal relationship” (Baker, 2002) and “a mixture of parent and peer” (Levinson *et al.*, 1979). As a consequence of these variations in defining the mentoring process and the role of the mentor, there is some uncertainty about the nature of activities that may be considered as mentoring. Jacobi (1991, p. 505) suggests that because of an absence of a widely accepted operational definition of mentoring, research in the area “subsumes several distinct kinds of interpersonal relationships”. These relationships may be accepting and supportive, allow for the sharing of privileged information, provide advice and guidance and extend protection (Jacobi, 1991).

While not planned, the mentoring group established for new academics and reported in this paper is comprised of women only. It has been suggested that in an environment where most senior academics are male, women have fewer mentoring opportunities than their male counterparts. This results in the need to establish more formal mentoring opportunities for female academics, particularly, “new” academic women (Quinlan, 1999).

Woodd (1997, p. 333) identifies three primary areas of mentoring in higher education: mentoring of students; mentoring of trainees studying for a qualification; and the third,

“support for teaching staff as they enter a new establishment”. It is this third area of mentoring that provides one way of considering this discussion of mentoring that focuses on developing a scholarly approach to teaching and learning.

A different perspective of mentoring is presented by Shapiro *et al.* (1978). Their perspective is critical of the value of role modelling and formal mentoring of professional women. Instead they refer to a continuum of relationships providing the potential to assist women in traditionally male-dominated professions. At one end of the continuum is the support provided by an individual mentor – “go find yourself a mentor” (Shapiro *et al.*, 1978, p. 55) defined in paternalistic terms. At the other end is the relationship referred to as “peer pals”, identified as a relationship between peers, helping each other to succeed. This is achieved through the sharing of information and providing sounding boards and advice for one another. Peer pals help each other and help themselves. Blackwell's (1989) study of new lecturers at a UK university found that differences in status had the potential to negatively influence the mentoring relationship. For this reason he does not recommend that professors mentor new academic staff.

Woodd (1997, p. 341) provides an enlightened overview of the process referred to as “mentoring”:

Mentoring is similar to management, as it can be implemented in a variety of styles and varying degrees of skills, much dependent on the beliefs and values of the day. The vast number of theories and texts on human behaviour shows its diversity. If it were a simple science everyone would be a master of it.

In their study of teacher education, Maynard and Furlong (1993) refer to three models of mentoring – the competency model, the apprenticeship model and the reflective practitioner.

The competency model is focused on developing teaching practice involving practical training against a set of predetermined and predefined competencies. Maynard and Furlong (1993) refer to the mentor as taking on the role of systematic trainer, observing the trainee and providing feedback. In higher education, flexibility of teaching practice is a key issue, particularly as student cohorts become more diverse and students' expectations and requirements differ. The competency model is not considered as an appropriate framework for the mentoring process undertaken and reported in this paper.

The apprenticeship model refers to experience gained by working alongside and observing an experienced practitioner (teacher). In some instances, this model may seem appropriate in higher education; however it is suggested that observation of experienced teachers does not guarantee the development of scholarly approach to teaching and learning.

It is the third model espoused by Maynard and Furlong (1993), the reflective practitioner model, that best describes the intended approach to this research project. That is, the notion of drawing together academic staff “new to the educational establishment” with a focus on sharing ideas and encouraging the mentees to examine their practice in a non-hierarchical and non-judgmental way. In addition, and importantly, the mentor is involved in the process as a learner in the same way as the mentees (Woodd, 1993).

As measures of teaching quality increasingly dominate the working lives of academics, there is an expectation that academic staff not only research their discipline, but also research their

teaching practice. Developing a scholarly approach to teaching and learning requires an understanding of the literature around teaching in HE generally, and accounting education specifically. This knowledge enhances an academic's ability to make informed changes and improvement in course design – a sometimes difficult task for seasoned academics, let alone those new to the teaching environment.

Another common thread for staff involved in this project is that they are entering a “new to them” educational experience. Some of the participants have many years experience in accounting education while others have less. Each brings a different perspective to the research project, and their newness to the educational experience of student-centred assessment in HE adds a unique perspective.

In the initial stages of the research project, the key drivers were: encouraging staff “new to the establishment” to develop a scholarly approach to teaching and learning; de-mystifying the research process; and “getting some runs on the board” in terms of a conference presentation and a refereed journal article. It should be noted that the mentoring process provided the framework for the progress of this newly created research team. Throughout the process the key focus was on writing a research paper for an assessment conference. Mentoring, simply yet importantly, provided the impetus to achieve this common goal.

The discussion that follows tells the story of the mentoring process, including the outcomes to date.

Establishing a goal

Having recognised an interest in teaching and learning exhibited by the mentees, the mentor was keen to encourage this interest and develop a scholarly, reflective approach to improvement in teaching and learning. A call for papers for a local, refereed conference about student-centred assessment provided a focus and the starting point for the process.

A copy of the call for papers was distributed to the four staff with an offer of meeting to discuss how the group might work together with the aim of submitting a research paper. The response from all staff was immediate and an initial meeting was arranged. During discussions in that meeting, it became clear that the reflective practitioner model identified by Maynard and Furlong (1993), would provide a framework for considering the process that the group were undertaking. This model is concerned with providing encouragement and support to academics/teaching staff entering a “new establishment”. These staff are not necessarily new to teaching as such, but share a common bond as individuals entering a “new to them” education setting. The mentees in the research group reflected this categorisation. Further, this model requires that the “mentor move from being a model and instructor to being a co-enquirer” (Maynard and Furlong 1993, p. 82).

Not another meeting!

Academics bemoan the increasing number of meetings attended in the current accountability-driven HE sector, and the lack of tangible output that often results. For the mentees in this process, their newness to the sector meant that they had not yet made commitments to committee membership. However, they were undertaking relatively high teaching loads – not uncommon for newly-appointed staff.

The mentoring group met several times prior to developing a structure for the paper on student-centred assessment in accounting education. Prior to each meeting, reading material was identified and distributed by both the mentor and the school research librarian. In particular, the school research librarian provided additional and valuable guidance about researching appropriate databases and sources. Discussion at each meeting reflected the content in these papers. Initially, the mentor provided the reading materials, but as time progressed, the mentees would locate and distribute other articles of relevance. This was an encouraging sign.

After three meetings and a discussion about how the first research paper on student assessment might be structured, it was agreed, at the mentor's initiative, that the mentees would meet as a group without the mentor. This provided an opportunity for mentees to discuss how they would like the research to proceed without the influence of the mentor. The mentee group met twice and then requested that the mentor attend the next meeting.

It was apparent to the mentor that members of the research team were contextualising the issues raised in the literature to their own teaching practice. Mentors expressed their amazement about the value and relevance of the work of many researchers of teaching and learning in HE (particularly Ramsden (1992) and Rowntree (1977) and also the considerable literature now available in the accounting education journals). The group considered this literature as fundamental in developing a scholarly approach to their teaching and learning. Yet, without the mentoring process, these academics most certainly would not have been exposed to this literature in a timely manner. As the mentor reflected with the group, there are many academics who have never read this valuable body of literature that directly informs one of our core activities – teaching and learning.

Issues to resolve

Each of the mentees had undertaken relevant reading and were developing confidence in their ability to articulate their ideas, based on their increased understanding and familiarity with the literature around teaching in HE generally and accounting education specifically. What the group found difficult was the ability to focus on the aim of their first research paper by drawing together the various strands of the literature. Issues around lack of clarity and the subsequent potential for time wasting were of concern to the group. In this instance, the mentor was able to provide valuable guidance and identify and clarify a structure to form the outline for the developing research paper.

A second issue for the group reflected the different discipline backgrounds of the mentees. Three of the four mentees had accounting as their primary discipline and the fourth had law.

The literature in this area provided some insights into the thoughts and experiences of others about cross-disciplinary matters. Becher (1989) suggests that the work practices of academics vary according to their discipline because they respond to different intellectual challenges. He further suggests that the discipline is more conspicuous than the paradigm through which academics view the purpose of their work, rely on different methods and frameworks and accept different types of value. However, like paradigms, disciplines produce and embody a culture (Toma, 1997). In an ethnographic study of the culture of academic accounting departments in three Australian and one British university, Bellamy (1999), using a modified framework from Clark (1983), found that culture is discernible at the discipline level.

The research of these authors presents a view that an academic's discipline has an impact on the way they view the nature of their academic work, the production of knowledge and the type of work that they value. From the perspective of the mentoring group, the differences in academic disciplines played out in various forms including interpretation and application of the literature and the style of written communication. While these issues were apparent and did cause some concerns for the group, their impact was not insurmountable, primarily because of the group's ability to raise and discuss issues of concern. At times, these issues were raised by individuals with the mentor, but the issue was always brought back to the group for resolution.

Research outcomes and mentoring

The mentoring group was formed in the first semester of employment in the School for each of the mentees. After 12 months the research group had prepared and presented two research papers for two different academic conferences. In addition, the following outstanding outcomes have been achieved by individual members of the group. While there is no evidence that the mentoring process was directly responsible for these outcomes, there is reason to suggest that the research activities of the group, as a result of the mentoring process, enhanced the likelihood of them.

M1 was nominated in 2005 as part of a group teaching award in the category of Student-centred Teaching at her university. She presented one of the research papers emanating from the mentoring group at an academic conference in late 2004. In addition, she is actively pursuing research for two papers. The first is focused on the writing apprehension skills of students. The second is on the impact of a specific assessment tool as a motivating factor for student-centred learning. She is in the process of developing a PhD research proposal in the area of accounting education and was recently promoted from a Lecturer A to Level B after external advertising of the position. M1 provided the following feedback:

The mentoring process was invaluable in guiding me to the education literature and introducing me to conference presentations. It also gave me the confidence to continue writing and researching in academia and the support and encouragement from the mentor was extremely valuable.

M2 provided the following details of her progress to date:

As a team member preparing a paper on assessment it was necessary to be able to reach consensus about the material we were reviewing. The mentor provided an invaluable resource on providing a clear and logical path to gaining consensus and turning theoretical concepts into a practical approach that can be utilised as a practitioner. My current teaching is in courses with large student numbers (over 1,000 per year) where the number of students is at times overwhelming. The knowledge I have gained from this experience has impacted on my ability to convince colleagues of the importance of assessment from a student's perspective. This I believe has improved the students' experience without unduly increasing academic workload. This was reflected in my nomination for a teaching award in 2004 by a colleague. I am also currently enrolled in a masters program. Again the knowledge I gained from the writing of an academic paper, particularly in relation to research skills, has assisted me in researching and writing.

M3 provided the following feedback of her progress to date:

The process of researching the paper and consequent introduction to the education literature provided me with the tools necessary to design an assessment regime which was recognised as student-centred by a Faculty of Business teaching award within my first year of full-time teaching. It has also provided me with the confidence to present at two conferences in that period, and to commence active research towards publications in both my own field, and in teaching publications. I plan to enrol in my PhD before the end of the year (within 12 months of completing the paper).

M4 developed her early academic career from a contract base engagement to ongoing staff employment. Her teaching style, which has been deeply influenced by the mentoring process, has been positively recognised by students as measured by student feedback. She recently secured a competitive research grant which followed her first research paper with the mentoring group. Currently, she is actively researching for her Masters degree.

As a result of the mentoring process, the approach of mentees to their teaching and learning research and practice closely aligns with that described by Adler *et al.* (2000) as “the reflective educator” in accounting education. The mentees in the group do read the relevant literature, do collect, value and act on student feedback for improvements and do continue to develop innovative teaching practices that question traditional practices. There is evidence that the mentoring process has been a vigorous and proactive approach as suggested by Adler *et al.* (2000) and reflective as suggested by Maynard and Furlong (1993).

Reflections of the mentees

A survey was sent to each of the four mentees to gather their views of the mentoring process. Mentees were invited to answer seven questions, having reflected upon the mentoring process.

In response to the first question – “What did you think the mentoring process would provide?” – all respondents referred to the opportunities to collaborate with peers; receive guidance about research (where to start, what to write, relevant literature); develop a deeper understanding of issues around assessment; and receive regular feedback from the mentor.

All respondents agreed that their expectations had been met, including one mentee who indicated that the research outcomes were beyond her expectations.

Respondents were asked to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of the process. Positive aspects included: learning about the different environment in higher education; developing confidence; friendship; becoming familiar with the literature; contextualising the literature through discussion with colleagues; learning from others in the group; meeting with the mentor in groups or individually and then having the opportunity to meet without the mentor; improved teaching practice; and group support.

Two negative aspects were identified by respondents. The first related to cross-disciplinary issues as they relate to academics from the law discipline and the accounting discipline. These discipline differences were clearly evident in the style of writing and referencing used by law and accounting academics. As a group, all were mindful of the need to prepare a research paper that was written using a consistent language style and referencing. Ensuring that this occurred required sensitivity and tact on the part of all group members. The second issue was around delivering to timelines. Not surprisingly (and reflecting the general working

environment) adhering to agreed timelines was a higher priority for some mentees over others. Having recognised this, the mentor adopted a lead role in communications around adherence to deadlines. This approach resulted in improved adherence by group members.

When asked if anything surprised the mentees about the process, respondents indicated that the amount of time it took to form a common understanding of the task was surprising. Also the difficulties of working on a joint paper with four other colleagues were raised as was the value of investigating the literature around teaching and learning.

Suggestions for improving the process included ensuring that staff from the same discipline are grouped in the first instance, more regular meetings and more time to have more meetings and work on the research project.

In the final question, mentees were asked to reflect on how the process added value to their working lives. Responses indicated that the development of a scholarly approach to teaching and learning and in particular assessment, provided a solid foundation for scholarly reflection of their practice and instigating change for continuous improvement. In addition, respondents indicated an increased level of confidence in initiating change as a result of their knowledge of the literature.

Reflections of the mentor

The motivation to initiate the mentoring group came from the mentor's own experience of a lack of mentoring for academics new to an educational environment. Often the mentor had lamented this occurrence and on completion of her PhD it seemed the time was right to remedy those concerns. In addition, it was clear that there was a group of new staff that showed an interest in developing a scholarly approach to teaching and learning, by their attendance at teaching and learning events and general interest in the learning outcomes of students. Clearly, these were motivated staff that showed an interest in developing a scholarly approach to their teaching and learning; an approach the mentor believed was necessary in developing the confidence of the mentees to initiate changes in their course design. These changes were sometimes at odds with existing staff who had been teaching in the subject area for many years.

From discussions with the mentees as part of a group, and individually, the key aspect of concern revolved around discipline differences and adhering to deadlines. The potential impact of discipline differences on the working lives of academics has been discussed earlier in this paper with reference to the relevant literature. The experience of this mentoring group accords with the findings in that literature.

With regard to the meeting of deadlines, there is anecdotal evidence that this is not a high priority for some academics and, it is suggested, reflects the realities of working in the academy.

Providing an opportunity for mentees to meet without the mentor proved to be valuable. Mentees were able to share their thoughts and also issues of concern regarding the research project. For example, after two meetings without the mentor, the mentees requested a meeting with the specific purpose of providing a clear structure for the research paper. This was an area identified by the mentees, as a group, where clearer guidance from the mentor was

required. Requesting the meeting with this specific purpose potentially shortened what might have been a more drawn out process.

One aspect of surprise to the mentor was the continued enthusiasm of the mentees and their commitment to meetings and ongoing research of the literature. As academic workloads increased throughout the semester, there was ample opportunity provided by the mentor for mentees to leave the group because of unforeseen pressure, with an accompanying invitation to rejoin at a more suitable time. These pressures did eventuate; however each of the mentees continued working with the group.

The most challenging issues for the mentor was ensuring that issues of concern (cross-disciplinary and meeting deadlines) were openly discussed in the group to ensure that mentees felt supported as individuals and as part of a group.

The challenges ahead

The outcomes from the process are both tangible, in terms of conference presentations, research papers and staff development and intangible, in terms of developing confidence, friendship and a demystifying of the research process. The mentees have been encouraged to continue their research of teaching and learning issues. To date, two of the mentees have continued this in a formal manner.

A key challenge now is to ensure that another mentoring process is commenced with academics who may not be new to the institution, but are new to research. This in itself will provide new and different challenges for the group, not the least being the lack of motivation that potentially exists with longer-term academic staff whose focus is on teaching and learning in the absence of a scholarly approach (i.e. reference to the literature to reflect and improve practice).

To recall, the driving factors for the success of this mentoring project were the motivation of all staff involved in the process and the deadline to prepare a research paper on assessment practice for a targeted conference. While the latter is easily replicated, the former is often problematic.

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Appendix. Profile of the mentoring group

The research group is all female and comprises:

- A lecturer in law, employed on a contract since July, 2004 and since on a tenured basis, previously employed in industry with two years sessional teaching experience at an interstate university.
- A lecturer in accounting employed on a tenured basis since July, 2004 with approximately 28 years teaching experience in the TAFE sector.
- A lecturer in accounting employed on a tenured basis since August, 2004 with approximately nine years teaching experience in the TAFE sector and three to four years experience in sessional lecturing and tutoring in HE.
- A lecturer in accounting now employed on a tenured basis and previously employed on a 12-month contract since July 2004 with previous experience as a sessional tutor in the School. She is a recent graduate of the School, now teaching in the program that she studied.
- A senior lecturer, employed at the University for 13 years, who has recently completed her PhD thesis (the mentor).

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