

E-Mentoring in the nGAP Mentorship Program: Practitioners' Narratives

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Abstract: Mentoring has earned itself growing popularity in higher education due to its impact on the development of both the mentee and mentor. While some institutions use mentoring in their undergraduate and postgraduate education, others have found it a tool to advance their early career academics. In some institutions, mentoring involves individuals with similar experiential levels, whereas in others, it involves individuals from different levels of experience. Very little, though, has been said on the use of e-mentoring as a device that connects individuals and enhance their learning. Furthermore, researchers are found to rely heavily on interviews and questionnaires as their sources of data, with rare cases where practitioners have room to narrate their lived experiences. The purpose of this article is to share the learning experiences of the three colleagues (a mentor and mentee in the nGAP mentorship program and an instructional designer [practitioners]), in a South African university who participated in and narrated their e-mentoring experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We used relational-cultural theory as it enabled their connection and interaction despite extreme differences in experience and knowledge. We used thematic analysis technique and specific developmental relationships—zest, empowered action, increased sense of worth, new knowledge, and desire for more connection—emerged as the findings in this study. Besides institutional resources such as workshops, technological infrastructure, and constant communication, sociopsychological factors such as dedication and commitment, communication and trust, openness and willingness to learn, courage and availability for one another, made the connection, relationships, and learning possible.

Keywords: Academic Development, Developmental Relationships, e-Mentoring, Mentee, Mentor, nGAP Mentorship Program, Relational-Cultural Theory

Introduction

Leading universities across the globe encourage the development of focused mentoring systems for their academic staff (Schriever and Grainger 2019). This clearly explains that mentoring has effectively become a requirement within leading universities globally (Savage, Karp, and Logue 2004). To echo this practice, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa introduced the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) (DHET 2019) to provide mentorship for young academics and support their development and growth in academia. Young academics in the nGAP are assigned mentors in the host university with whom they learn for the duration of the program.

At the heart of the nGAP are two engines whose functionality can either strengthen or weaken the program: the mentee and the mentor. The former is a junior or newly appointed employee of the university, while the latter is a senior academic staff member officially appointed to assist the mentee in meeting agreed academic and career development goals (these include learning). They enter into a relationship with the purpose of advancing the academic development and career success of both individuals (University of Pretoria 2016).

While the milestones to be achieved in this mentorship journey are clearly spelled out in the policy document, very little in the way of guidelines to follow has been provided. Consequently, it is incumbent on the partners to figure out what works and what does not. It should be acknowledged that—due to the COVID-19 pandemic—the university at which participants in this study are employed has had to transition through different modes of delivery within record time: from

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traditional (face-to-face) to hybrid (combination of online and face-to-face) and from hybrid to e-learning (fully online). For e-learning to take place effectively, the university is using the clickUP (UP in-house brand name for the Blackboard Learning Management) system. Although the mentee and the mentor in this study had some experience on e-learning, having used the hybrid model, the role of the instructional designer, who provides e-support, became crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic when contact activities went fully online. Her expertise on clickUP was used for purposes of mentoring and e-mentoring, and she helped the mentor and the mentee to utilize tools such as Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, Google Meet, emails, and WhatsApp as their learning tools in pursuing their academic development mandate.

This article reports on the qualitative research approach—narrative inquiry research design—that was used by the mentor, the mentee, and the instructional designer to share their experiences of e-mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic. In narrating their experiences, they highlighted learning that occurred during the process of e-mentoring. However, before we proceed further to discuss their leaning experiences, it is important for us to present the background from which this article emerged.

Background—nGAP Mentorship Program

The DHET in South Africa saw a need to address the challenge of staff capacity in higher-learning institutions. As a result, the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF) was approved early in 2015, and from this framework emerged programs such as the nGAP (DHET 2019; Moosa 2020). The nGAP comprises two stages: professional development and continuing permanent appointment. After successful completion of the professional development stage, the nGAP lecturer continues with a permanent appointment at the host university (Hlengwa 2019). Mentoring is therefore a crucial feature in both stages. For this reason, for the first four years of the program, each academic in the program is assigned a mentor (DHET 2018)) with whom they learn and develop academically.

The Department of Education Management and Policy Studies (EMPS) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria became the host of the nGAP Lecturer, and it is against this background that the authors compiled this article. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Africa early in 2020, higher learning institutions (HLIs) summarily suspended their contact academic activities and continued remotely. As a result, academics suddenly had to work from home. Fortunately, due to the technologically advanced character of teaching at the university, participants in this study were able to pursue their roles from different provinces. To be specific, the mentee's home province is 529.5 km (the longest route) away from that of the mentor and the instructional designer. This huge distance compelled them to opt for e-mentoring so as to pursue their mutual learning and career development processes.

Mentoring: Meaning in Context

Mentoring has been acknowledged and recognized as an appropriate professional learning and development strategy for academics in HLIs (Harvey, Ambler, and Cahir 2017). It is viewed as the process in which a seasoned and experienced mentor and a newly appointed mentee share knowledge and skills (Arnesson and Albinsson 2017) and, hence, the two learn from each other through the sharing process. In fact, the partnership starts when the mentor and the mentee agree on goals that are appropriate for their career success in academia (Kaplan 2019). According to Lewis and Olshansky (2016), mentoring can be regarded as a professional relationship between a mentor and a mentee in which they share expertise for the purposes of professional learning and growth. Both parties play a significant role in the success of the mentorship and the learning process (Arnesson and Albinsson 2017), and mentoring leads to personal and professional learning and growth for both (Hackmann and Malin 2019).

Research suggests that mentoring can be either formal or informal (Dhunpath, Matisonn, and Samuel 2018). Formal mentoring (as in this study) is a coordinated relationship between a mentor and a mentee, and it usually involves a third party who initiates the relationship (Menges 2016). In our study, the DHET and the host university acted as the third party. Informal mentoring, on the other hand, comprises an unguided relationship (Muschallik and Pull 2016) in which learning and growth are usually less productive and successful than in a formal situation (Harvey, Ambler, and Cahir 2017). Since it was not clear what determines the success of formal mentoring, this article has been an attempt to close this gap.

The benefits of mentoring for both the mentor and the mentee include (but are not limited to) networking, professional growth, and increased research productivity (Schmidt and Faber 2016). This implies that the learning that takes place during mentoring actually leads to career growth and output. Mentoring also benefits host institutions in terms of effective staff recruitment, retention, and performance, as well as through the actualizing of staff potential (Du and Wang 2017). All this is possible through attributes such as trust, confidentiality, loyalty, honesty, responsiveness, and time investment from both parties (Kaplan 2019). The challenges associated with mentoring include power dynamics, the inability of a mentor and a mentee to meet each other's needs, and the fact that mentoring is demanding and time-consuming (Ambler, Harvey, and Cahir 2016). Based on the definitions derived from the above literature, this article defines mentoring as a two-way learning process influenced by the relationship between a mentor and a mentee, with the goal of advancing the career development and success of both parties. It is from this definition that the authors of this article share the e-mentoring and learning experiences of the mentor, the mentee, and the instructional designer by making use of a narrative inquiry research design.

The “What,” “Why,” and “How” of e-Mentoring

Several factors determine the transition of universities from one mode of delivery to another. One such factor is transformation due to a need for addressing issues of access, success, and equity, while responsiveness to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) as a global demand is another. In the case of the study participants reported on in this article, the outbreak of COVID-19 became the determining factor, and e-mentoring became a necessity for the successful learning and career development of both the mentor and the mentee.

E-mentoring—also referred to as virtual, distance, remote, or online mentoring—involves a mutual relationship between a mentor and a mentee whereby both provide career development and emotional support via electronic tools such as laptops/computers, smartphones, and tablets, using an Internet connection (Tisdell and Shekhawat 2019). This support involves guiding, advising, encouraging, and modelling (Kumar and Johnson 2017), and the technological tools, as enablers for e-mentoring and learning, make it possible to bridge distance and continue mentoring during times of social distancing (Soto et al. 2019). Technologically speaking, e-mentoring knows no physical boundaries. The e-mentoring approach allows the mentor and the mentee to communicate, interact, and learn on different online platforms by using emails, skype, video calls, telephones, messaging, and discussion boards (Ongozi 2018). This requires them to have appropriate technological skills, which is provided in the form of support by relevant skilled experts to overcome any technological challenges (Tominaga and Kogo 2018). The mentor and the mentee in this study indicated that they relied on support from the instructional designer/e-supporter.

E-mentoring is generally less expensive than contact mentoring because of the reduced travelling costs involved (Salimi, Mohammadi, and Hosseini 2017). It does not only bridge geographical distance but also contributes to the acquisition of improved communication, writing, and teamwork skills (Neely, Cotton, and Neely 2017). E-mentoring comes with flexibility because the parties involved are able to work and contact one another at times that are suitable for all (Kumar and Johnson 2017). Research also shows that regular communication contributes greatly to the success of e-mentoring relationships (Tanis and Barker 2017). However, e-mentoring has its

challenges that may compromise learning, such as miscommunication that leads to misunderstanding between the parties; poor Internet connection; device malfunction; poor written communication and technical skills; lack of online communication skills; and lack of privacy and confidentiality (Tominaga and Kogo 2018). Relational-cultural theory appears to minimize most of the e-mentoring challenges, as is discussed below.

Relational-Cultural Theory

The relational-cultural theory, developed by Jean Baker Miller in 1976, is a theory of human development through connection and interaction between individuals where the involved individuals learn and grow from the relationship (Hammer, Trepal, and Speedlin 2014). This learning and growth, according to Alvarez and Lazzari (2016), occur in a relationship characterized by mutual empowerment and empathy. As Davidson (2018) puts it, mutual connection results in meaningful outcomes that include zest, empowered action, increased sense of worth, new knowledge, and a desire for more connection.

Scholars supporting the relational-cultural theory view zest as a connection between parties in the e-mentoring relationship that gives them a sense of increased energy and vitality. It also empowers and enables them to put into practice their learned experiences in the relational interaction (Lewis and Olshansky 2016). As a result, their sense of worth is increased and, in turn, they experience the value of using one's relational skills to effect learning and mutual growth (Jordan 2008). This mutual connection yields new knowledge that is co-created through a process of fluid interaction in which individuals fully contribute their own thoughts and perspectives while being readily influenced by those of the other (Fletcher and Ragins 2007). Davidson (2018) affirms that this mutual connection process creates the desire for more connection—a desire to continue this particular connection or establish other learning and growth-fostering connections, thus leading to a spiral of growth that extends outward beyond the initial participants (Block and Tietjen-Smith 2016).

In the context of this article, the continuous interactions and engagement among the mentor and the mentee taught them to teach virtually and improve their overall job practice. They both grew as they learned from one another and gained greater confidence in their duties, thus agreeing on the need for continued mentorship. The relational-cultural theory landed us in narrative inquiry research in the hope of hearing the lived experiences as independently narrated by the mentor, the mentee, and the instructional designer.

Narrative Inquiry Research

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) saw narrative as a way of studying human beings' experience of the world and of structuring and organizing these experiences as they construct new knowledge and make it more learnable (Pachler and Daly 2009). In other words, life itself may be seen as a narrative that consists of many different stories (Moen 2006). Based on these definitions, it can be concluded that everyone has different narratives (Polkinghorne 1995)—so did practitioners in this article.

Research evidence suggests that narrative research is increasingly used in studies of education where academics and students are the main contributors (Moen 2006). In other words, these academics and students are the storytellers “in their own, and other's stories” (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, 2). In the case of this article, participants who were involved in the mentoring program at a South African University volunteered to disclose their e-mentoring and learning experiences and also offered to share such experiences with other academics. The participants were academics in the first academic year of their nGAP mentorship program, whose first three months of their mentoring experience were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To capture their unique experience in the said faculty and department, narrative research—as the most suitable qualitative research design—enabled the participants to narrate their lived experiences.

Telling and hearing their own stories, which are self-reflections on experiences in their natural setting, helped them understand their behavior, actions, and feelings within context and to learn from their weaknesses as they improved their academic practice. This article describes how participants told their individual stories, which included their detailed learning experiences of what they did in, and learned from, the e-mentoring process, why and how they did it, and their reflection/viewpoint on the process (Elçi and Devran 2014). In analyzing their stories, we reread and reorganized the narratives in accordance with the aim of this article.

In narrative study, storytellers are typical rather than representative of a population (Creswell 2007). Accordingly, there was no direct interview and therefore no first-hand personal interaction between the researcher and any participant. Each participant independently narrated her own story and handed it over to the authors, thus voluntarily sharing her e-mentoring experiences. The quality of the research was ensured in the following manner:

- We took stories back to storytellers after re-storying them in order to confirm accuracy.
- We used “mentor–mentee and instructional designer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of account” (Creswell 2003, 196).
- We controlled actions and applications that were engaged through the e-mentoring and compared them with the stories.
- The narrative inquiry provided an opportunity for researchers and participants to collaborate in understanding behavior and discover explanations, which means that the validity of participants’ responses could be confirmed (Esin, Fathi, and Squire 2014).

Analysis of Participants’ Stories and Findings

In analyzing the narratives in this study, we took into consideration the plots that emerged to frame the experiences of the participants involved in this article. These included their (a) prior e-mentoring experiences—knowledge and skills; (b) emergence of the e-mentoring partnership; (c) the process of e-mentoring—giving and receiving; and (d) relationships that developed between the mentor and the mentee.

Experience Prior to e-Mentoring: “Knowledge and Skills”

Participants in this study had prior experience of being either an academic, support staff member, or researcher at a higher learning institution. For instance, from the mentee’s narrative, it was evident that besides the three months at the host university, she had had a year’s academic experience at a previous institution. “I joined the academia as a novice lecturer in one of the universities in 2018 which ended in just a year.” Academically speaking, she was a novice, as was clear from her remark: “Due to being new in the academia, I did not know much about my roles and responsibilities besides teaching.” Her experience clearly indicated that she had not received any mentoring but seemed to need some: “I longed for help, I missed that helping hand extended to me, and I longed to hear a voice saying ‘how can I help you?’” In her narrative, the mentee mentioned that although there were some academics who expressed sympathy toward her, they could not do much because they also had overwhelming responsibilities: “Although they would claim to be available for assistance... ‘You can come to me for help,’ they would say, but they were sincerely not available to assist and I understood.” A lack of mentoring left her hopeless; she felt alone, unable to keep up with all the demands and duties, and no one noticed her struggles. “I felt overwhelmed and, as a result, my academic journey in this institution ended in just a year.”

In narrating her prior e-mentoring experience, the mentor remarked that she “has been in the host institution, faculty, and department for more than ten years. First as a master’s and doctoral candidate from 2007 to 2013, then as the postdoctoral research fellow from 2014 to 2016, and permanently joined academia towards the end of 2016.” As she put it, “I am the daughter of the soil.” From this narrative it appeared that the mentor was thoroughly aware of the academic

requirements, processes, and practices of the host institution. In addition, her experience as a postdoctoral fellow had exposed her to a two-year period of mentoring processes and practices. The aim of the postdoctoral fellowship program, as described by many, is to develop and nurture professional and academic skills in early career academics.

The instructional designer had been employed at the host institution for more than ten years. It was clear that she had the necessary mentoring and possibly also e-mentoring experience. Her responsibilities, as she put them, were to “train students and staff in Blackboard Learning Management System, managing activities in online modules effectively, identify and analyze e-learning needs with academic departments and many more e-support activities.”

The skills and knowledge outlined above enabled the participants to learn and be open to new ideas of teaching that could contribute toward their career development, regardless of the uncertainties caused by the pandemic.

Emergence of the e-Mentoring Partnership

As the mentor put it,

It was hardly two weeks after the commencement of the mentoring partnership when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the suspension of contact academic activities. The period between the 26 March (when the state of emergency was announced) to 4 May 2020 when e-teaching and learning was officially launched was like a year to me.

She went on to say, “I pictured her (the mentee) faced with a double-edged sword—the new world (academia) and COVID-19 pandemic. The two were exacerbated by the fact that we were miles apart. This reality made her vulnerable and could result in her quitting the program and giving up on her dream,” the mentor remarked. Although they tried to contact each other on regular basis, they sometimes experienced network challenges and they lived in different provinces. The physical distance became the worst enemy. Even though the mentee was with her family, the mentor was worried about her: “I felt like she was alone.”

In her narrative, the mentor revealed that although she had the necessary academic and mentoring experience, she did not know much about the e-mentoring. “Besides the fact that I went through the mentoring where virtual meetings were an option but not necessity, this was my first exposure to e-mentoring.” With the skills obtained from the clickUP trainings offered by the instructional designer, the mentor was able to prepare for their first virtual meeting. “Because time awaits no one, I had to kick off the first virtual meeting that would map our journey.” At their first virtual meeting as mentor and mentee, she did not want to show her lack of skills in e-mentoring; she held tight onto the fact that “learning and academic development [was]...the heart beat” of her role in the nGAP program, as advised by the Head of Department (HoD). “That, I did not have a problem with, since I was once a mentee. All I needed was to change hats to that of a mentor and the e-mentor for that matter,” she declared.

The mentee’s narrative indicates that she had to relocate to her home province soon after announcement of the state of emergency that prohibited interprovincial movement. “Because of the COVID-19 restrictions that included prohibition of interprovincial travel, I went home when the lockdown started.” In her opinion, her e-mentoring journey started when the mentor invited her to a virtual meeting through the URL link that she received via email. She also received a follow-up call from the mentor giving instructions on how to operationalize the link. She added:

As I was mentally deliberating on how my mentor and I are going to be pursuing this journey, I received an email with the link. I must be honest that I was astonished by the use of the link for a meeting since I had hoped that we were going to utilize emails most of the time. My mentor’s email was followed by a WhatsApp call that confirmed the virtual meeting and explained the use of the link. I then realized that the learning journey has begun.

One of the tasks that they did during their first meeting was that her mentor took her through the online marking process for the BEd Honors assessment. This experience, as she described it, “was warm and welcoming and it felt great to learn from her.”

Unlike the mentor who had heard about the nGAP program but had no details of it, the instructional designer had no knowledge of it at all. “I neither heard nor knew about the nGAP program.” She mentioned that she did not consider herself as being directly involved in the program. Regardless of her distant involvement, she pointed out: “I was available for both lecturers to make their e-mentoring successful as it is my role. My presence in lecturers’ academic activities included their training on the use of clickUP tools to make their e-mentoring and learning successful regardless of the distance.”

It emerged from the above narratives that although e-mentoring was new to all of them, their open-mindedness and positive attitude to learn from one another with the given resources made their transitioning from the hybrid to e-mentoring mode a success.

The Process of e-Mentoring: “Giving and Receiving”

Due to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, e-mentoring became the only enabler for the mentor and the mentee to pursue their learning and career development. They tried to contact each other on a regular basis, but sometimes experienced network challenges. Nevertheless, in her narrative, the mentee mentioned that regardless of the distance, she and her mentor had to continue. “My mentor and I were at a distance, but had to continue with our duties.” It emerged from her narrative that as part of their learning and career development process, the mentee was also assigned some modules to teach: “Like everyone else, I had some modules that I had to deliver through the online platforms.” This, according to her, “was a new journey altogether and I had to make it work. Fortunately, my mentor was there to hold my hand.” The mentor and the mentee worked together as they embarked on this new journey. As the mentor put it, “we would request assistance from the instructional designer who helped us with appropriate platforms that we would use.” The mentor and the mentee would organize and test the Blackboard Collaborate platform prior to actual lessons: “I did not know how to create virtual classes, live sessions, and how to avail URL links for recorded lessons to students. Nonetheless, my mentor was there throughout the way and with her guidance, all would go well.” They would reflect on the lessons and eliminate their shortcomings moving forward. According to the mentee, this reflection process “improved my learning because I would correct my mistakes as I learned from them. I really appreciated all she [the mentor] did because that enabled me to be fully prepared and to virtually face my students with confidence.”

The mentee also stated that they would have virtual meetings via platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate, WhatsApp video calls, and Google Meet. In these meetings, they would discuss academic matters such as external examination, manuscript review, critical reading of research proposals, and postgraduate supervision: “My mentor would share with me manuscripts and dissertations for critical review, after which we would discuss feedback via virtual meetings.” The mentee gained much from this experience and admitted that she “learnt about critical analysis of these important scholarly documents, scholarly argument, and provision of constructive and professional feedback.”

Her mentor also recommended her for co-supervision of the master’s (MEd) degree students. “I would review these students’ proposals, then forward them to my mentor for further review. We would then virtually meet and discuss my feedback,” said the mentee. On several occasions, the mentee served as critical reader of research proposals for MEd students. In her opinion, this “opened my academic world. I felt empowered and a sense of belonging.”

It emerged from the mentor’s story that she also had some modules to teach and, consequently, she and her mentee “were ‘e-teaching and learning buddies’.” She mentioned that they would together attend the online training sessions held by the Department of Education Innovation (EI). “We wouldn’t miss any because we regarded them as our life jacket,” she stated.

In cases where the mentor forgot about these sessions due to too many responsibilities, the mentee “would remind me of the sessions we had to attend.”

The mentor gave reasons why she needed to be well-informed about new developments. First, she explained:

I did not want us to fall behind with our duties; second, I tried to avoid extra voices that could bring confusion to the mentee; thirdly and possibly lastly, I did not want to overuse the services of the instructional designer who happened to be available for us at all times.

While she (the mentor) strove to be well-informed about new developments, she stressed that she herself “was at the same time extra careful that [the mentee] does not explode due to workload and too much information.” It was for reasons such as these that the mentor took extra care not to “run out of airtime or data because she would call, email, or WhatsApp me at any time she needed to.” The mentor added: “The same applied to her, she was available at all times when I needed her. For instance, she used to have lessons on Mondays from 12h30 to 13h30. That hour remained clear on my schedule to accommodate her.”

The instructional designer confirmed that “both the mentor and mentee attended some of the clickUP courses.” The online teaching and learning “was not a peculiar environment for the mentor and mentee in this program as they had some experience of using the system,” she elaborated. “The mentor was more experienced in terms of the functionalities and benefits thereof,” she added. With the mentee, it was still early as “she was a new staff member in the faculty. I therefore acted as a mentor to the mentor and mentee in this program and provided individualized guidance when the need arose,” the instructional designer explained.

As indicated by the narratives in this study, e-mentoring was never plain sailing. Regardless of the ups and downs, the members of the trio were there for one another. They would attend training sessions together, protect one another, and promote collegiality through sharing the acquired knowledge. Their skills of using technology for teaching and learning improved as they could use an increasing number of the assessment and collaborative tools that were available in the system.

Emergence of a Relationship between the Mentor and the Mentee

It is unclear as to when the relationship between these two parties actually started. For the purpose of this article, we shall focus on their relationship as they travelled the e-mentoring journey and learned together.

After their introductory meeting, the e-mentorship journey began in all earnest. Their narratives suggest that the mentor and the mentee often had virtual meetings. It was in such meetings that interactions pertaining to the program, goals and objectives, action plans, as well as timelines took place. It is therefore our assumption as the authors of this article that it was in such meetings that the seed of the relationship between the two germinated.

Their narratives also suggest that when the e-mentoring journey began, they did not have any idea of what to expect. However, as the mentee put it:

Our relationship got stronger and stronger each day. I never thought it would be easy for me to call anyone ‘Mah’ since the passing of my mother in 2018. To my surprise, I found myself calling my mentor ‘Mah’. Indeed, I feel that she is my mother and I find it easy to call her ‘Mah’ because I have seen that she has my best interest at heart just like how my mom would. This has been a great journey and learning experience.

The mentee believed that their relationship was at this level for a number of reasons:

We communicate regularly; we have shared skills, knowledge with willing hearts. We do not only share successes but also share challenges experienced during our teaching and learning. We would make fun about being blocked by cookies. If I delayed to join the session with two to three minutes, I would see the message ‘my gal I cannot see you, where are you?’

From the above, it is apparent that the relationship between the mentee and mentor in this study did not focus on academic matters only, but went beyond that. The two partners learnt to open up to each other and share challenges—both academic and personal. To date, there have been no hindrances to their co-authorship and co-supervision of postgraduate students and they continue to benefit from each other’s wealth of knowledge, experience, and skills, even though they are separated by distance.

Discussion

In our discussion of the findings of this study, we look at the mentoring journey as travelled by the mentee, the mentor, and the instructional designer. We examine these findings against the background of the reviewed literature and the theory that underpins the phenomenon communicated in the article. Although there may be similarities between our findings and the existing literature, we have remained objective, holding that the findings communicated in this article are unique, based on the context of the practitioners. Also, while the practitioners are employed at a particular institution, their learning and e-mentoring experiences took place somewhere else. Circumstances detached them from the university as their natural work setting. Our interpretations led us to Miller’s relational-cultural theory of 1976, where the five outcomes of developmental relationships, namely zest, empowered action, increased sense of worth, new knowledge, and desire for more connection, manifested strongly—as is discussed below.

Zest

We discovered from the narratives that the mentee lost her mother in 2018. This could explain her need to have a mentor who could act in that role: “Someone who would feel my heartbeat and be prepared to take me to where it directs us.” Her feeling resonated well with the nGAP coordinator’s description that “it must be a female mentor.” On the other hand, the mentor brought not only her own experiences to this relationship but also her feelings and thoughts, and she interacted with great sensitivity and awareness of the possible impact of her actions on the mentee (Jordan 2010) as her learning partner. “I longed to hold her by a hand or pat her on a shoulder and whisper to her ear, ‘it will be fine my gal, distance cannot be a barrier to our learning and success,’” the mentor professed.

We sensed a connection between the mentor and the mentee that contributed immensely to their learning, human growth, and development (Hartling and Sparks 2008). Fletcher and Ragins (2007, 376) refer to such connection as “growth in connection” since it is underpinned by mutuality and the skills of all the participating parties (Davidson 2018). “We shared skills, knowledge, and experiences with willing hearts. We would laugh as we reflected on our experiences. She taught and guided me with love, and I will never forget all that I learned during those moments of laughter,” the mentee remarked. “Their expression of appreciation kept one going. I felt being part of the academia,” the instructional designer recollected. They endorsed moments of emotional sensitivity and valued one another’s supportive behaviors (Fletcher and Ragins 2007). Through their emotional presence, they brought their actual selves to this relationship, and this affirmed their ability to create meaningful learning spaces and moments with one another (Lenz 2016). They experienced a sense of increased energy and vitality that empowered and enabled them to together confront the circumstances that would otherwise inhibit their learning and growth (Davidson 2018).

Empowered Action

According to Sargent and Rienties (2022), the purpose of mentoring is to create an opportunity for the inexperienced to learn and grow from the knowledge, experience, and skills of the experienced. However, the narratives in this article formulated mentoring and e-mentoring

definition differently, as the participants found the learning process to be a two-way street. In their opinion, all three had knowledge, experiences, and skills of some kind that enabled them to confront e-mentoring—a hitherto strange concept to everyone. In other words, one of the benefits of e-mentoring as described by the participants was to help them build useful relationships and make connections (Homitz and Berge 2008) that made their learning and growth possible. While empowerment appeared to be an important factor in the relational connection that developed among the participants in this study, it also showed up as a product of relationships that promoted the validation of “self in relation” (Jordan 2010, 20).

The mentee admitted that she had prayed for an empowering journey prior to the mentorship journey. “Lord, let it be someone suitable for me, someone who will be willing to share their expertise and knowledge with me.” She felt that these characteristics were very important because she wanted to learn as much as possible and to grow in her practice. As the authors of this article, we also heard the mentor’s response: “She has dreams and life beyond this mentorship program. I hold the right key to her future, the key her family may not have.” The instructional designer similarly indicated: “I was available for both lecturers to make their e-mentoring journey successful.” As the journey continued, the mentee reported: “My mentor opened a new door for my academic learning and development. I never imagined these milestones but with her good intentions for us, I achieved most of the professional and academic target areas.”

In these narratives, we witnessed that the participants had regular communication and interaction through different online platforms such as emails, skype or video calls, telephone conversations, messaging, and discussion boards (Ongozi 2018). The developmental connection that they experienced greatly enhanced their level of career satisfaction, cultivated a sense of greater acceptance, and decreased career stress on the mentee’s part (Tisdell and Shekhawat 2019). We also came to agree with Hartling and Sparks (2008), who validated people who learn and grow through participation in mutually empathic and empowering relationships, as well as with Lewis and Olshansky (2016), who affirmed that engagement in supportive relationships throughout one’s life enhances development and strengthens resilience.

Increased Sense of Worth

In a mutual growth-in-connection relationship, the parties need to recognize the increased feelings of worth that come from the experience of having “self-in-relation esteem” (Lenz 2016). Participants in our study not only demonstrated a growing sense of self; they also remained open to learn from one another’s experiences and from the capabilities that emerged when they related to one another (Lenz 2016). Their increased sense of worth, according to Lewis and Olshansky (2016), resulted from the establishment of a context of respect, trust, and willingness to learn that the participants brought to this partnership.

For instance, the three parties worked together every step of the way. They learned to communicate regularly and utilized the best-available technologies that made their job easier (Stockkamp and Godshalk 2022). They were “e-teaching and learning buddies,” as described by the mentor. As stated by the mentee, “Indeed, I feel that she is my mother. She was there throughout the way. She involved me in academic activities and that has opened my academic world. I felt empowered and a sense of belonging.” The mentor, in turn, added: “She affectionately became one of ‘my gals’ and she earned that nickname as I became her ‘Mah’.” These utterances demonstrate strong relational values and interpersonal connections that significantly influenced their learning experiences during this mentoring journey (Early 2020). Trust between the mentor, the mentee, and the instructional designer as was revealed in their narratives indeed played a crucial role in the success of their e-mentoring relationship (Salimi, Mohammadi, and Hosseini 2017).

New Knowledge

According to Jordan (2017), the ultimate goal of the relational-cultural theory is to promote engagement in growth-fostering relationships so as to result in empowerment and a sense of mattering. When growth-in-connection takes place, there is certainly learning and the construction of “new knowledge.” The mentee confirmed: “I did not know how to create virtual classes, live sessions, and how to avail URL links for recorded lessons to students. My mentor taught and guided me with all these.” In fact, learning emanated from the ability of the participants to engage in “fluid expertise”—they fully contributed their own thoughts and perspectives but at the same time were open to the understanding suggested by others (Fletcher and Ragins 2007). The mentor confirmed this attitude and admitted: “We would not miss any of the online training sessions. I would consult with the instructional designer who was available at all times.” In the instructional designer’s opinion, these mentorship partners adhered very well to the e-teaching and learning principles. “I was impressed by their professionalism.”

These recollections serve as evidence of the mentor and the mentee’s appropriate technological skills for e-mentoring, which contributed to the effectiveness and success of their journey (Tominaga and Kogo 2018). They attended webinars and empowerment workshops, reviewed manuscripts, and examined dissertations together. They would reflect on the lessons and improve on the shortcomings moving forward. The learning they gained as part of this e-mentoring journey resulted in improving the participants’ technological and research skills and increased their career success. For the higher learning institution, it also had the potential to result in increased retention rates of academic staff (Tanis and Barker 2017).

Desire for More Connection

Based on the narratives in this study, the researchers sensed a desire to continue this particular connection and/or establish other growth-fostering connections, thus leading to a spiral of growth that would extend outwards and beyond the initial participants (Davidson 2018). “This kind of learning and growth continues. We now embark on the co-authorship journey,” the mentee remarked, while the mentor stated: “Our relationship grew stronger to an extent that we would not only share academic-related activities but also health- and social-related issues.” The instructional designer concluded that she wished them “all the best even beyond the program.”

Despite the headway made during the challenging circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, e-mentoring still has a long way to go. Nevertheless, the fact that technological tools have become enablers for e-mentoring, it possible to continue mentoring, even in socially distanced circumstances (Salimi, Mohammadi, and Hosseini 2017).

Conclusion

It should be evident from this study that one does not require a formal research project for practitioners to share their learning experiences. Instead, narrative inquiry research has the potential to create a safe platform for participants to express their feelings, communicate their lived and learned experiences, and contribute a wealth of knowledge to the topic under discussion. Furthermore, this article argues that mentoring—and e-mentoring in particular—can serve as a strategy to connect individuals with extremely different experiences, knowledge, and institutional cultures and enables them to learn from one another.

To conclude, we discovered three principles that emerged from our study: (a) Mentoring is a learning strategy; (b) mentoring is a two-way learning process; and (c) mentoring can involve more than two parties. We therefore recommend that HLIs give mentoring and e-mentoring the recognition it deserves by making it mandatory for early-career academics, most importantly now when the teaching and learning processes have gone digital nearly completely and given that the precautions and restraints imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic still continue, albeit in minimal ways, and threat of arrival of new variants of the COVID-19 virus.

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