

The Peer Mentoring Forum: An online, inter-institutional mentoring network

This paper will discuss a case study of an online mentoring network that facilitated reciprocal mentoring between postgraduate researchers across four research organisations. While peer mentoring has been introduced successfully at many educational levels, it is still a relatively novel practice in doctoral education. Similarly, though PGR networks are increasingly common, they tend to focus on information dissemination rather than discussion, and often have a social focus. They are also normally restricted to one institution.

The peer mentoring forum was set up primarily to support students working on a joint public engagement project. Its aim was to provide a non-hierarchical space where researchers could share concerns with their peers, possibly to seek advice, but certainly to discuss issues. Because the network operated across four institutions, it was also intended to facilitate networking.

The paper discusses the benefits and challenges of this approach and the measures adopted to address them. While initial engagement was poor, the introduction of specific measures helped to boost numbers. However, the forum was used primarily as a means of sharing information, and findings suggest that face-to-face methods are preferred.

Introduction

Mentoring schemes are now a well-established feature of higher education, and have been adopted in some research organisations to support the career development of researchers, though these are mainly post-doctoral. While peer mentoring has been successfully adopted in undergraduate courses, it is still relatively underused in doctoral education. Similarly, while online networks, particularly for postgraduate researchers, are quite common, these have tended to have a social focus and are primarily used as a means of disseminating information. The use of an online community as a vehicle for mentoring has not been much explored in this context. Yet, it has the potential to facilitate discussion on a wider scale, and could support a more reciprocal form of mentoring. This paper will discuss such a network that offered peer-to-peer mentoring as part of a public engagement scheme for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers¹. We will consider the effectiveness of such a scheme, its implications for researcher development, and the benefits and challenges we encountered.

The traditional view of mentoring is that of a mentor-mentee relationship, with the former, as the more experienced partner, dispensing wisdom to the passive latter. In doctoral and postdoctoral education, this, to a great extent, has been the role of the supervisor. In many ways, this seems understandable. There is a pre-existing relationship, with aligned expectations, based on a shared goal, and reliant on the supervisor's superior knowledge and experience. The arrangement has two disadvantages, however. The first relates to the very superiority of the supervisor: mentoring relationships where there is too great a disparity between the partners do not flourish (Driscoll et al., 2009). The second is determined by the nature of the supervisory relationship, which is based on the achievement of one end – the production of a doctoral thesis or outcome of the postdoctoral research project. It is not necessarily concerned with wider aspects of development. Moreover, however close the relationship might be, a supervisor is not a friend, and researchers may find it difficult in those circumstances to share problems related to their progress.

¹ While this paper considers the situation of both doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, it becomes cumbersome to constantly refer to both. Therefore, unless there is a particular reason to identify postdoctoral/early career researchers, we will normally refer only to doctoral/PhD researchers; this should be taken to include both groups.

The nature of the mentor-mentee relationship is critical to the success of the partnership. While there is an obvious professional perspective, the relationship is also a personal one, in which mutual regard is crucial (Reid, 2008). To a great extent, this relies on the role of the mentor, who must act as guide, advocate and friend (Colvin and Ashman, 2010), while walking a fine line between friendship and authority. On the one hand, the relationship must be one of trust and understanding, with an openness of communication (Reid, 2008). On the other, however, the mentor must offer guidance based on knowledge and experience, and while not becoming overly-prescriptive, may at times need to be proactive, with an outcomes-based approach (Hawker et al., 2013).

This is not to say that the relationship is one-way. A successful mentoring partnership is characterised firstly by compatibility (Hawker et al., 2013, Reid, 2008), and then by commitment (Hawker et al., 2013) and reliability (Colvin and Ashman, 2010) from both partners. While it is important at the outset to have similar expectations, the relationship develops as a result of shared experience (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). A sense of joint reflective practice, where there is flexibility of roles and focus (Driscoll et al., 2009), seems to be when the greatest gains are experienced, for mentor as well as mentee (Donnelly and McSweeney, 2010). Driscoll (2009) found that where there was too great a gap of knowledge and status, this mutual reflexivity was impeded. Hansman et al (2003) explain this in terms of the power dynamics of the relationship. For many reasons, therefore, this form of mentoring has many disadvantages and is limited in its capacity to support development.

Some years ago, the notion of peer mentoring emerged as *a newer approach which pairs an inexperienced person with a knowledgeable individual or group of the same status* (Level and Mach, 2005, p303). This model addresses many of the difficulties encountered with the traditional approach, and while it is appropriate at any professional level, it seems to be particularly apposite for those in relatively junior positions. Both doctoral students, and indeed early career researchers, are still finding their professional identity, and are easily undermined. In this scenario, the mentee feels free to discuss issues and share experiences, and the mentor feels free to act as friend as well as advisor. Since both partners are of equal, or near equal, status, the mentor is in a better position to relate to the mentee's experience, and the mentee is able to view the mentor as a realistic comparison/role model (Festinger, 1954).

Peer mentoring can adopt the dyadic model seen in traditional mentoring, as for example, Gregoric's (2015) auto-ethnographic case study of a mentorship partnership between an early career researcher and a doctoral student. For both partners, the relationship resulted in improved work effectiveness, as well as offering psychosocial benefits, and for the mentor it was also a successful learning experience. One of the advantages of this sort of relationship is that it serves to enhance the learning of both parties (Potter and Hampton, 2009). In a similar vein, Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2000) found increased levels of both career and psychosocial support in a graduate student mentoring programme.

The adoption of a group setting, in which all members take the role of both mentor and mentee, seems to offer a particularly fruitful approach. Driscoll et al (2009) found that their group of early career researchers developed a collaborative approach that supported professional aspirations, while at the same time offering personal support. All had previously been assigned a senior academic as mentor. In contrast to the isolation and self-doubt associated with their previous experience, the group approach promoted self-understanding, along with a clearer notion of their professional environment and their place within it. The difficulties associated with the earlier partnerships could have been related to the formal nature of the schemes, in which mentors were appointed rather than selected. In a situation where either party is reluctant to engage, the relationship is unlikely to flourish (Hansman, 2003). In this case, the members' shared experience promoted a spirit of collegiality that began with critiquing each other's work and ultimately, resulted in collaboration. Successful

relationships, it seems, are the result of working together (Boud and Lee, 2005), and a collaborative framework contributes to self as well as group efficacy (Goosney et al., 2014).

One of the characteristics of schemes such as these is the face to face nature of their interaction. There is, however, growing interest in the use of the internet to facilitate, particularly group, interaction. Online communities have been established to promote reflective learning, to offer support for career development, and most significantly for the purposes of our project, as a vehicle for mentoring. The use of technology in this way has the potential to increase and extend mentoring provision, providing flexibility and possibly widening the pool of mentors. However, its effectiveness has yet to be established. While there are descriptions of mentoring programmes operating in this way, as yet, there is little research into the outcomes (Butler et al., 2013). One study that has evaluated outcomes is a quantitative enquiry by Smith-Jentsch et al (2008) comparing face to face and electronic mentoring, specifically by analysing their interactions against a measure of post-mentoring self-efficacy (using the College Self-Efficacy Inventory: [Solberg et al, 1993]). The electronic condition resulted in lower self-efficacy, though this was the case only with male mentors and seemed to be related to their style of interaction, which involved more condensed language. In a longitudinal study, Drenzo et al (2010) found that previous experience played a significant role in the success of the programme. They identified three antecedents necessary to its effectiveness: previous experience of social media, previous experience of mentoring, and mentee motivation to participate.

While the previous studies involved dyadic partnerships, others have established various forms of group programmes. Lockyer et al (2002), for example, set up a scheme to support education students during teaching practice, which, though moderated by tutors, facilitated group discussion. Sattler et al (2012), in a multi-institutional programme for graduate engineering students, adopted a mixed model, involving monthly conference calls alongside an online forum. The students were organised into groups of four to six, each with a mentor. Finally, though not a mentoring programme, a report by Smithson et al (2012) of the online forum of an interdisciplinary research team is relevant in the present context. The forum was set up primarily to facilitate collaboration and exchange of ideas between members who were separated geographically. However, as with the Drenzo (2010) study, the lack of previous experience hindered any meaningful interaction, despite a number of interventions, discussed below. All of these examples experienced setbacks: in the Lockyer (2002) project, students generally responded to tutors' questions, and unprompted discussion tended to concern personal or social topics; and in the Sattler programme, students claimed that the experience helped in the construction of their identity as researchers, but was not so successful in supporting their professional and personal development. Nevertheless, there seems to be sufficient positive experience in all of the schemes discussed here to warrant a trial of such a programme.

Context

The peer mentoring forum was established to support doctoral students and early career researchers working on a public engagement programme designed to promote career development. The *Knowledge Exchange in Design* (KED) scheme, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, was a research project piloting a new approach to promoting researcher experience outside the academy. The scheme paired researchers with individuals from external organisations to work on short, focused projects. It was a collaboration between four research institutions, and involved partnerships with a range of non-academic organisations, both commercial and cultural. The aim was to enhance public engagement with design research and provide career development opportunities for the researchers involved. Knowledge exchange was achieved through the establishment of residencies of 3-5 days; projects might involve a problem-solving exercise, contribution to the planning or delivery of a specific project, or development of future strategy; the only stipulation being that the project must produce a tangible output, for example, a report or presentation to the partner organisation.

In order to support those involved in the scheme, a number of challenges had to be addressed. Firstly, all participants were geographically separated: the research organisations were based in four different cities and the partner organisations were widely dispersed (not all were based in the immediate geographical area). Secondly, the scheme represented a new way of working for all participants: researchers were using their research-related skills in a different context, presenting their ideas to a non-academic audience, and partners similarly had to adapt their working style to correspond to academic protocols. Finally, the projects operated within a short timescale, requiring imaginative solutions and rigorous project management.

Aims

The main aim of the KED scheme was to enable researchers to gain experience and expertise outside the academy. Any support system must, therefore, fulfil the needs of the scheme, while at the same time addressing the wide geographical and professional range. Specifically, we aimed to:

- Encourage reflection on the residency experience through discussion and the sharing of ideas.
- Facilitate networking across a disparate group of individuals from different disciplines and professional backgrounds.
- Establish a non-hierarchical space where participants could freely articulate their concerns, seeking and giving advice.

Recognising that researchers embarking on a novel and challenging project would benefit from mentoring, peer mentoring, rather than the traditional one to one format, seemed the more appropriate choice. The *Peer Mentoring Forum* was set up to integrate these various functions: reciprocal mentoring, networking and shared reflection. For pragmatic reasons, we adopted an online approach, and the programme was moderated by a professional coach, experienced in the career development support of postgraduate researchers.

Setting up the mentoring scheme

The selection of an appropriate vehicle to support the forum involved discussion with partner institutions, external organisations and IT support staff, who advised on the viability of various options. We agreed at an early stage that building an original scheme would be too cumbersome within the timeframe, and therefore, explored a number of existing social media fora. Two schemes that most participants were familiar with were Facebook and LinkedIn. Both were convenient and relatively easy to navigate, and both had the capacity to host a closed group. Since Facebook generally supports social interaction, LinkedIn seemed a more appropriate platform to host the forum. It had the advantage that most of those involved would have some familiarity with its use, it provided an open access resource that could be used by all four research organisations, as well as potentially the partner organisations, and additionally, provided an appropriate and ready-made route for professional networking. A closed networking group was therefore set up to enable cross-institutional and organisational discussion. Academics at all levels, including supervisors of researchers, were also invited to join the forum, thus extending the scope for cross-level conversations with more experienced peers. The forum was introduced at the launch of the KED scheme as an integral part of the scheme as a whole, and training sessions, both for mentoring and in the use of LinkedIn, were established.

Training

At the outset of the scheme, a (face to face) training session on peer mentoring was organised for all those participating in the scheme. This included external partners, and supervisors were also encouraged to attend to provide some familiarity with the process involved. This session had a number of key objectives:

- to introduce researchers to mentoring relationships with their peers and partner organisations
- to develop skills of effective mentoring, including acting as a mentor and a mentee
- to consider individual action plans and personal career development, within the context of the scheme
- to develop a plan to support the continuation of the peer mentoring discussions and learning online.

An introduction to the organisation of the scheme, its management and logistics, was followed by more detailed discussion of the support participants would receive, both from the moderator and the KED leader. The roles of both mentor and mentee were addressed. The forum was designed to support reciprocal mentoring, in which all participants at different times would act in both roles. Participants explored potential uses of the forum, and considered the implications of wider participation. Ethical issues associated with mentoring, as well as participation in an online forum, were fully explored, and principles of engagement established.

The training was designed to allow the researchers to work in pairs and small groups, and included time for individual career planning and goal setting. Since the primary purpose of the KED project was to facilitate career development through public engagement, it was important that the mentoring scheme should be embedded in that process. In this way, the training focused on the three significant aspects of the scheme: peer to peer support, exchange with project partners, and individual self-reflective practice. Mentoring was therefore introduced in its broadest sense, and not in the traditional meaning where it is confined to one to one interaction with a more experienced mentor.

A number of training sessions were also provided on the use of LinkedIn for those unfamiliar with the platform. In addition to the practicalities of setting up and using a LinkedIn profile, the training also covered the added benefits of:

- using LinkedIn to build and sustain a network of contacts
- raising the profile of your research and developing an online presence
- capturing content about the residency and its progress

Participants were encouraged to use the forum from the outset of the KED scheme, regardless of whether or not their personal residency had begun.

Initial Findings

The *Peer Mentoring Forum* ran for ten months, covering the timespan of the KED scheme. In all it recruited 26 members: this included 17 researchers, 6 partner organisations and 3 scheme organisers (there were 20 partnerships). Initial engagement was lower than expected, with very few members initiating discussion. Despite the efforts of the moderator to stimulate communication, during the first two months most contributions were factual, and typically, in response to direct enquiries. Following this disappointing start, an offline meeting was organised, to which all participants, including both active members and those not using the forum, were invited. The meeting was generally well attended; most researchers, though fewer external members, were present.

While the meeting was intended ostensibly to consider issues around the *Peer Mentoring Forum*, much of the early part of the discussion focused on the KED scheme itself, the individual residencies, and the general progress of the scheme. The discussion was positive, and it was apparent that researchers were keen to share their thoughts and experiences. They particularly valued the opportunity to meet with others at different stages. In considering the use of the forum, however, a number of issues emerged. The general view was that, as a vehicle of dissemination, the forum had potential; there was a real interest in others' projects, and a desire to publicise their own. By contrast, there was reluctance to view it as a mentoring tool. The reasons for this mainly revolved around issues of privacy and confidentiality. Researchers expressed concern about the security of the closed group,

though this was unfounded. They also said they felt uncomfortable raising individual issues in a group setting, and would prefer to discuss these issues privately with the moderator. Although, when the forum was set up, provision was made for such discussions, the general response was that these should also be offline. While there were some more practical issues identified, time issues, for example, and problems with access by external users, these concerns were comparatively minor. The two major conclusions of the meeting were:

- the belief that networking and other group sharing operated more successfully as part of a physical meeting
- a preference for one to one, face to face mentoring.

Subsequently, a few participants followed up on their comments on the forum. One comment was that researchers' primary focus was their residencies and management of their projects rather than reflection and sharing with their peers². This feeling was partially reflected in one participant's reservations:

I don't think the LinkedIn platform worked that well. Perhaps a different form of social networking group would have worked better, or good old fashioned group emails. I personally find the LinkedIn platform a bit too clunky and I prefer to keep my research separate from the other professional networking which goes on there.

One researcher suggested a dedicated blog as a potentially more popular alternative, particularly if they could upload visual representations of their projects. This was an interesting comment in view of subsequent developments.

Interventions

As a result of this discussion, a number of measures were put in place. Immediately following the meeting, the moderator set up another training session, and also circulated a *Peer Mentoring Forum Guide*. This was in response to some researchers who apparently were still unfamiliar with the LinkedIn platform (and in some cases, the use of social media generally) and consequently, felt uncomfortable with its use. At first sight, this seems surprising. The researchers were young people, and therefore assumed to be familiar with a variety of social media packages. They were also used to the range of software and online packages customary in an academic environment. Yet, transferring to a new, unfamiliar format can often involve a more radical shift than we imagine. This was the case for the Smithson et al (2012) research team, who found, in using their discussion forum, that more technical support than expected was required.



Peer mentoring forum logo derived from wordle

The difficulties we were encountering were in many respects the same as those encountered by Smithson et al, and the interventions they introduced seemed equally appropriate for our situation. The first of these was what Smithson called synchronous talk, in which specific topics for discussion were introduced at regular intervals. Smithson et al found that, when these topics were directly relevant to the project, team members participated more fully. In our scheme, we decided that, despite their different, individual

projects, there were commonalities of experience that could be explored. The moderator therefore decided to introduce a monthly discussion thread on a key theme relevant to the KED experience. The first of these was a request to *provide three words to describe your project start-up. What benefits do you see?* One of the researchers combined the words submitted to develop a *wordle*, which was subsequently adopted as the logo for the forum.

² This reflection did occur much later, as part of their end of project reports, and in KED meetings.

Another theme asked for *an example of where knowledge exchange has taken place on your KED project*. This question generated the most comments (twelve), and was an interesting exercise, because it was asking researchers to reflect on the essence of what they were doing. While they sometimes found it difficult to articulate an aspect as nebulous as knowledge exchange, the thread demonstrated a capacity for sharing their reflections. Two typical examples were:

Not sure how to summarise the knowledge exchange – but I’m sure it’s happened ... I’ve learnt a lot already about the job of the curator, and the things they are considering when thinking about a new exhibit. I think what I’m bringing to the project is an outside eye, and my ideas about creative research methods.
(Amy)

I haven’t started my project ... yet, but I’ve started a literature search and started reading up on [memorialisation practices], so I’m learning new things and have come across some research techniques I wasn’t aware of. What I’m hoping to gain from the project is some ideas and experiences of working with professionals in a different sector, but also the opportunity to tailor my existing knowledge to a project, and hopefully expand my repertoire in doing so!
(Zoe)

This strategy achieved a certain amount of success, but we were keen to encourage a more *democratic* involvement, which didn’t rely solely on the instigation of the moderator. Like Smithson, our definition of a *discussion forum ‘working’* is *when team members post without coercion and find some aspect of the discussion useful* (Smithson et al., 2012, p15). To this end, the moderator identified a number of forum champions: researchers who regularly posted on various social media platforms and had previously been active on the *Peer Mentoring Forum*. Their role was to respond to the monthly key themes, but also to generate threads of their own. The champions were proactive, and posted regularly, though their posts tended to be updates on the progress of their projects rather than more reflective pieces.

In terms of mentoring, these interventions did little to overcome participants’ reluctance. It was not feasible within the parameters of the scheme to offer individual mentoring, and at this stage, it would have been difficult even to introduce face to face group mentoring. Besides, we were convinced that all of the participants would gain more from sharing thoughts and experiences with each other. We therefore introduced a *blended* approach, in which engagement with the forum was supplemented by face to face meetings similar to the first meeting, but with less focus on the forum and more discussion of wider issues. This approach has been used successfully in the past (Holmes et al., 2005, for example, in their mentoring programme for teachers), and is similar to that adopted by Sattler et al (2012), in which online mentoring was supplemented by monthly conference calls. Two further meetings, together with the final KED symposium, were held and the forum was evaluated at the end of the programme.

Supplementary Findings

Following the various adaptations, the forum was used more extensively, though it was never wholly embraced. Most researchers added posts at least once, and some sustained relatively lengthy threads. The programme leadership used the forum to disseminate information, such as dates and agendas for meetings and events (though these were usually supplemented by emails). They also contributed to the key themes, as well as instigating new discussions. The student representative regularly shared information and requested feedback for the steering group. External participants contributed little to the forum, and senior academics did not engage at all. Both of these groups did, however, attend meetings and events.

Researchers' updates tended to be descriptive and factual. Typically, people would post information on activities, report on progress, and celebrate successes. This provided a valuable means of maintaining contact between meetings and cross-institution events. Milestones such as submitting end of project reports were announced on the forum, and were hailed as celebratory events. There was little evidence of reflection on their experience, or discussion of its value. Researchers did not seek advice from others in the forum. However, a post by one researcher, who was grappling with a difficulty around the ethics of consent, did generate some considerable discussion.

In our final evaluation, then, we were able to identify particular benefits to the forum, specifically:

- as a cross-institutional network
- as a means of sharing experience
- as a means of promoting individuals' work

There were also definite challenges that we were unable to overcome. The forum did not successfully support:

- inter-organisational interaction (with external organisations)
- peer mentoring

This last was the major negative finding of the project.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite its slow start, the *Peer Mentoring Forum* did eventually become a useful and relatively well-used medium. It fulfilled its most pragmatic purpose: that of a cross-institutional communication system. As part of the KED project we ran four one-day events; these provided opportunity for formal presentation of projects, but more importantly, they served to bring the researchers together informally, to develop networks and alliances. We were always aware that this would not be sufficient for networking when individuals were so geographically dispersed, and the *Peer Mentoring Forum* successfully overcame this difficulty.

As a means of supporting peer mentoring, however, it proved to be disappointing.

The reasons for this are manifold, and seem to reflect the findings of other, similar studies.

We should not assume, however, that, because these aspects were not apparent in the forum discussions, that mentoring did not take place.

In terms of mentoring, one issue seems to be particularly instrumental in its success.

Recommendations

Researcher ownership

Blended approach

Explore alternative platform/approaches

Final conclusion

Clearly, there are some benefits perceived by participants.

The challenge is to find a way of enhancing those benefits while addressing the issues that caused barriers to full engagement.

Way forward for us??

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