Peer mentoring for first year teacher education students: The mentors’ experience

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Mentors’ experiences

Universities worldwide are developing peer mentoring programs to assist first year students’ transition into university life. Awareness of the mentees’ experiences in the mentoring program – the successes and challenges – contributes to ongoing planning for successful transition for first-year students. Also, understanding the mentors’ experiences can contribute to the success of the program and, more importantly, can lead to strong self efficacy for the mentors. This qualitative study appraises a mentoring program for first-year undergraduate students from the mentors’ perspective. The mentors’ experiences, both positive and negative, are discussed and a relational model of mentoring is presented. The results of this inquiry have implications for the development of future mentoring programs, particularly in terms of mentor recruitment and preparation, if first-year students are to be effectively oriented and supported in their transition to university study.

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Introduction

Universities are spending thousands of dollars each year attracting students. However, many university leaders are only now realising that they also need to invest money and time in supporting and retaining new students. The majority of higher education students is no longer school leavers; many are mature age students, returning to study after a period of time or attempting higher education for the first time. Others may not have completed secondary schooling, the traditional prerequisite for higher education studies, or if they did, might not have sufficient grades to enter a university course. Entry via alternative paths, for instance, the work force, alternative study (Technical and Further Education [TAFE], bridging courses), and prior life learning and skills is making entry to higher education feasible for people who might not have entered previously. With this diverse student population come challenges for universities in supporting each new cohort.

Many first-year university students experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty in making the transition to university study (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004; Dickson, 2000). Other key challenges in the transition to tertiary studies include the increased degree of independence required, introduction to new technologies and balancing the academic workload with other commitments such as work and family life. These and other issues have implications for students’ academic performance and attrition rates (Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2005). To improve student performance and reduce attrition, some universities have designed programs aimed at supporting first-year students in transition. The primary aim of the present study was to develop and trial a mentoring program, incorporating the principles and characteristics of other successful mentoring programs, designed to address the particular issues facing Technical and Further Education Students (TAFE) and alternate entry students entering the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) [BEd (EC)] in their transition to
Processes aiding the transition to university for first-year students have included faculty or discipline-specific programs (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000) such as academically oriented peer support programs (e.g., Ashwin, 2003), reciprocal peer tutoring (Rittschof & Griffin, 2001), online support (e.g., O’Reagan, Geddes, Howe-Piening, & Quirke, 2004), and mentoring programs (e.g., Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2005; Pollock & Georgievski, 1999). McInnis, James, and Hartley (2000) recommend that peer support and mentoring programs where more experienced students adopt the role of peer mentors are preferable because they provide more effective support during the first-year transition. Although the structure of these programs varies depending on the target faculty or discipline, these programs share some key characteristics that appear central to their success. Academic support is provided in various forms such as tutorials that allow first-year students (mentees) to review course content in a more concentrated manner (Clulow, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004), and training in academic skills such as assignment writing, referencing, strategies for exams (Muldoon, 2004; Trafford, 2003). Other academic support includes orientation to aspects of the university campus, particularly how to use the library and technology facilities, such as computer access (e.g., Drew et al., 2000). Social support is provided to mentees by organising social events for them to meet with mentors and other mentees (Drew et al., 2000; Peat et al., 2000), providing regular meetings with the mentor and opportunities to discuss the progress of the mentoring program with stakeholders (Fowler, 2004; Muldoon, 2004), and introducing mentees to student support services (Drew et al., 2000). Peer mentoring programs provide an avenue for new students to be supported by more experienced mentor students and make social connections with other new students (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006; Muckert,
Evaluations indicate that mentoring programs have a positive effect on transition to university, sense of belonging, retention and skill development (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006).

Mentors also benefit as they develop lifelong professional attributes worth fostering and experience satisfaction with their roles as mentors (Drew et al., 2000). Gilles and Wilson (2004) report advantages for mentors as including a sense of satisfaction and self-worth, enjoyment in sharing expertise and gaining new personal insights. Mee-Lee and Bush (2003) found that benefits for mentors at the Hong Kong Baptist University included feelings of satisfaction and the development of two-way communication between mentor and mentee. These benefits can be viewed as professional attributes that are worth fostering in initial teacher education and which may have further long-term advantages for mentors in professional contexts beyond their studies at university. In the present study, it was considered important to explore the mentors’ views of their mentoring experience from their perspectives to inform future developments of the mentoring program.

Mentoring in teacher education

Examples of mentoring programs in teacher education are few, but there is evidence of the need for such programs. For example, the Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education in Australia (2003) makes the point that “initial teacher education of a very high standard is an essential requirement for an effective, resourceful, diverse teaching profession” (p. 2). Attracting and retaining the “best and brightest” (p. 18) of students in initial teacher education programs requires a response on the part of universities to engage these students from the start and to provide an environment conducive to intensive learning that builds on their diverse backgrounds. Support for first-year students is part of such a response.
The demographic profile of students enrolling in first-year undergraduate teacher education programs differs from the Australian national profile of students. This is particularly so in early childhood education courses (c.f., secondary teacher education courses). For example, in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) [BEd (EC)] at our institution, Queensland University of Technology (a large Australian metropolitan university), mature-aged students made up approximately two-thirds of the commencing student population in 2004 compared with one-third of the national commencing student population (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Many of these students have studied previously at another university or at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institution or they may have entered university via alternative entry. While not a homogenous group they experience similar issues in transitioning to university life. Many of these issues are common to school leavers as well who must deal with complex campuses, unfamiliar administrative systems and varied class structures. First-year students must adjust to balancing competing deadlines; cultivating independence in learning; and developing skills in assignment writing, critical thinking, problem-solving and information technology skills (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Commencing university study can be a daunting experience.

The various paths that students take to enter university present many challenges for effective transition. For example, much of the instruction that occurs at TAFE is based on practical applications of knowledge and is not focused on academic skills and writing. Many alternative entry students have significant life and workplace experience, but they might not have completed secondary (high school) education and thus they might not have been introduced to skills of academic writing and critical analysis. While research has indicated the issues facing TAFE students entering university (e.g., Cameron, 2004; Cantwell & Scevak, 2004; Pearce, Murphy, & Conroy, 2000; Peat, Grant, & Dalziel, 2000), we also recognise that similar and other additional issues might also face alternative entry students. Some of these learners perform well (Shah & Burke, 1996); however, others may not possess
the basic skills needed for successful and rewarding study in higher education (Richardson, 1994).

Theoretical rationale for mentoring programs

Mentoring allows undergraduate teacher education students to exchange ideas and learn with others, and to co-construct meanings (Beattie, 2000). Planning support mechanisms to assist these students requires an understanding of learning processes involved in tertiary study, in particular, a focus on self-regulated learning. The learning oriented teaching (LOT) model proposed by Ten Cate, Snell, Mann, and Vermunt (2004) is a learning and teaching model dealing with the complexities of self-regulated learning. Ten Cate and colleagues proposed that learning involves the interplay of three learning-process components: cognitive (what to learn), affective (why learn), and metacognitive (how to learn). The transition from external to self-regulated learning entails a transition for the learner at each level where different support mechanisms come into play. For example, at the cognitive level support may involve facilitating the provision of relevant and timely information; at the affective level support may involve motivating students’ vested interest in their study; and, at the metacognitive level support may involve instructing students in how to study.

Support mechanisms must address all levels in a way that encourages steps towards more self-directed learning. Vermunt and Verloop (1999) emphasised the importance of finding the appropriate balance between guidance and self-regulation in education, referred to as constructive friction. Failure to achieve constructive friction may result in inadequate or ineffective learning for students (Weiner, 1979).

The amount of support required to achieve constructive friction varies depending on the student (Boekaerts, 1999). Ten Cate and colleagues (2004) describe three different levels of support in the form of guidance: full external guidance from the teacher only; shared
University programs generally require that students work within the third level as fully independent, self-regulated learners. Yet, for some students, achieving the appropriate balance between guidance and self-regulation requires intervention more aligned with the second level wherein shared guidance is necessary to create conditions necessary for constructive friction. This is where mentoring can assist; as it affords the opportunity for shared guidance in learning as the mentor/mentee relationship develops. In shared guidance a teacher or mentor must be able to engage students in ongoing dialogue, monitor their progress, and adapt information to student needs (Ten Cate et al., 2004). University classes are far too large for lecturers to provide this type of shared guidance; however, a peer mentor working with a small group of students outside of formal classes is a feasible alternative strategy.

Characteristics of mentoring programs

Mentoring programs can be structured in various ways. However, specific aspects that contribute to effective programs include the characteristics of the mentor, the size of the mentoring group, the presence of a coordinator, and a multidimensional approach to mentoring (Rolfe-Flett, 2000). It has been suggested that using more senior university students, rather than academic staff, may yield more successful outcomes. First-year students may be reluctant to approach or question academic staff and have difficulty relating to them (Grob, 2000; for an exception, see Muldoon & Godwin, 2003). Mentor/mentee relationships may be enhanced by matching mentors and mentees on the basis of similar interests or demographics (e.g., Drew, Pike, Pooley, Young, & Breen, 2000; Fowler, 2004). A study of Peer Assisted Academic Learning (PAAL) groups by Weisz and Kemlo (2004) found that PAAL leaders who shared commonalities with the students in their groups were more effective in supporting learning than academic staff. Also, selecting mentors with a strong
academic background and using interview procedures to assess the suitability of mentor candidates contribute to more successful programs (e.g., Clulow, 2000; Drew et al., 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004).

In this article, we describe a peer mentoring program that was initiated in the School of Early Childhood at the Queensland University of Technology by the first three of the four authors. The three authors are academics within the School and the program leaders who oversaw the design and implementation of the peer mentoring program. The peer mentors were selected from third- and fourth-year BEd (EC) students. The reflections they wrote formed the basis of our understanding of the mentoring process from the perspectives of the mentors.

Methodology

Design

In this study, third- and fourth-year BEd (EC) students (n=9) mentored first-year TAFE and alternative entry BEd (EC) students (n=48), and documented their experiences as reflections during the 13 weeks of first semester, 2004. Mentors’ written reflections were collected and analysed, qualitatively, to reveal four common themes. Written reflections were chosen as data, because, in early childhood education, written reflection is considered a powerful professional learning tool with a strong history of implementation in the field (MacNaugton & Williams, 2004; Millikan, 2003). Reflection is a process used to carefully consider values and practices in the light of supporting evidence. Reflection is considered to have value for undergraduate teacher education students in that it promotes habits associated with construction of new ideas and reconstruction of existing ideas with a view to improving practice.

Participants

Mentees were selected from approximately 220 first-year students enrolled in the BEd (EC), a four-year full-time/internal undergraduate early childhood teacher education program.
preparing graduates to work with children aged birth to eight years. Approximately 60 TAFE and alternative entry students were identified using university enrolment statistics.

Mentors were drawn from third- and fourth-year students who had successfully completed a health and wellness elective unit (subject) focusing on introductory-level counselling and social interventions. Further mentor selection criteria included a sound academic history (Grade Point Average of at least 5.0 on a 7-point scale), and accessibility to campus (for ease in conducting meetings with mentees). One of the program leaders contacted twenty-two potential mentors to invite participation. Nine agreed to participate. Mentors were paid a nominal stipend of AUD$300 (USD$200) each for their participation over the course of the semester. Funding was drawn from a small grant for university teaching and learning improvement initiatives.

The three program leaders (three of the authors) were three academics in the School of Early Childhood. The program leaders took on many roles within the program, including overseeing the design and implementation of the program, selecting the mentors, informing the prospective mentees at their first mass lecture of the program, coordinating mentee sign-ups, assisting in the development of a mentoring workshop, and acting as contacts for both mentors and mentees throughout the semester.

To prepare the mentors for their role, an induction-into-mentoring workshop was collaboratively designed and implemented by learning advisors from the university’s academic student learning support services, the program leaders, and an experienced student mentor. The experienced student mentor was a representative from the university-wide Peer Advisers Academic Learning (PAALs) scheme. The learning advisors were invited to contribute to the workshop as they had researched mentoring and coaching widely and were experienced in training staff and students in relation to a wide range of learning and teaching
matters. The program leaders, who were academics who taught in the early childhood programs, provided a more contextualised perspective to the training.

The LOT model (Ten Cate, Snell, Mann, & Vermunt, 2004) was used by the workshop presenters in developing the workshop but was not presented explicitly to workshop participants. The workshop introduced students, more broadly, to characteristics of effective mentoring programs and strategies for effective mentoring. There were four goals of the workshop. The first goal was to elicit the mentors’ experiences of their own transition to university as a basis for developing understanding and to pre-empt affective issues that might arise during mentoring. Second, the mentors were encouraged to explore how they could enhance first-year students’ awareness of the relationship between health and wellness and learning and study capacity, and the role of affective dimensions in academic success. The third goal was to enhance mentors’ awareness of university resources available to support students’ metacognitive processes, such as sessions with academic skills advisors, free learning seminars and courses, library information literacy classes, and specific international student support services. Finally, mentors were acquainted with the importance of reflection and the role of written reflections in the project data collection process.

To recruit mentees in the first week of semester, the program leaders and mentors attended a large group lecture to explain the project and invite participation from new students with previous study at TAFE or entry to university via alternative entry. All first-year students (n=220) present completed a short survey as a prequel to recruitment. This survey obtained demographic information and details on students’ pathways into university; elicited their expectations of university life, anticipated strengths and challenges and views on mentoring; and identified those fitting the criteria for participation and with interest in becoming involved in a mentoring scheme.
Approximately one quarter of the first-year students met the criteria for participation and forty-eight volunteered to participate. The TAFE students had completed a range of Diplomas, particularly the Diploma of Community Services (Children’s Services). The alternative entry students had approximately 10 years’ work experience in different settings (e.g., in a bank or business) but they might not have completed secondary education.

At the end of the first week of semester, each of the nine mentors received a package of information containing contact details for each of their five mentees. They also received a summary of first-year students’ responses to the survey questions relating to expectations of university life and anticipated strengths and challenges; this information formed the basis of their first group meeting with their mentees. Mentors set up the first group meetings by email and then decided on the best method of future contact (i.e., face-to-face meetings, email, phone contacts) for their mentee group with this pattern continuing throughout the semester.

In terms of support for the mentors, mentors were encouraged to write reflective comments following each meeting with their mentees and submit these via email to a nominated program leader. The leader responded to reflections in a supportive way, provided feedback on mentoring strategies, and assisted in managing any issues or concerns. As a further source of support, the project leaders with the assistance of university-based learning designers established a website entitled Mentors Assisting Transition Education Students (MATES). The MATES website was accessed by both mentors and mentees. The website held contact details for mentors, links to student learning support services, a discussion forum and opportunities for feedback and comments. The MATES site was then linked to the Online Learning and Teaching (OLT) websites for two core first-year units (subjects).

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were collected from the nine mentors during the thirteen-week semester in the form of their written reflections focusing on their mentees’ experiences,
progress and development; and their own experiences, growth and development throughout the experience. Mentors submitted at least one reflection each fortnight. Reflections varied in length from approximately 300 – 1000 words. Data were pooled and read by the project leaders. An interpretive-descriptive approach was used, involving the constant comparative method of data analysis proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This is an iterative process in which transcripts are read and reread by each member of the research team to determine recurring themes in the content of the email reflections. Data categories emerged directly from the content of the reflections by virtue of their structure as described above. Initial themes were coded, independently, by each program leader and the fourth author and these were refined in group meetings until agreement was reached. Finally, similar themes were combined, resulting in four main themes containing several sub-themes.

Results

Four main themes (each with sub-themes) emerged from the data: preparation for mentoring; personal approaches to mentoring; benefits of mentoring; and frustrations of mentoring. Indicative comments from the mentors exemplify each theme. We use pseudonyms to identify mentors in brackets after their reflective comments. In presenting the results, we let the mentors’ reflections speak for themselves in keeping with qualitative traditions, and we provide commentary in the subsequent discussion.

Preparation for mentoring

Preparation for mentoring was important. Capitalising on the energy and enthusiasm of the nine mentors was crucial. At the outset of the mentoring program, most mentors were enthusiastic about the prospect of mentoring, feeling that they could contribute to a smoother transition to university for mentees. They knew that their own backgrounds and experiences would be an important basis upon which to build further skills.
The offer of a mentor position was welcomed to extend the challenges of university, plus the confidence and desire to assist new students into the university community … I will try to direct these assigned students to the facilities with less stress than I had. (CP)

I hope to be able to make a group of first year students’ transition to university study less stressful, and to cushion and surround them with support and helpful information so that they have a greater opportunity for academic success. In a wholistic sense, I hope to equip or familiarise them with coping strategies and the wellness dimensions so that they can become confident, balanced, fit, healthy and overall, happy members of the QUT community. (FJ)

Also evident was an expectation of the opportunity for distributing advice to mentees, and the potential for learning in return.

I expect to learn quite a bit from the students and from the questions they have which I will hopefully help them to answer. (LH)

In preparing them for their role, mentors reported that the induction-to-mentoring workshop was informative and provided a sound basis for beginning mentoring. Overall, they felt adequately prepared. Significantly, they learned about aspects of their university, previously unknown to them. For some, this knowledge had a flow-on effect to enhancing their own student experience. Some mentors described a greater self-awareness of the need to discuss information with others to arrive at solutions to problems. Becoming aware of affective components of learning meant that they were able to share these benefits with their mentees:

I actually learnt things about the QUT website of which I was unaware. Also, we identified the differences between TAFE learning and university learning. …the other benefit of training meant that we threw ideas around. This has alerted me to the importance of discussing things to come up with solutions. Everyone has ideas, and they may be different from one another – by bringing them up in a group situation, we are alerted to factors we may have forgotten or not considered. I assume this will be an integral part of the mentoring. (JS)
During the training, mentors became aware that their role as mentors required additional skills, especially related to interpersonal relationships and fostering group membership. Prior to their first meeting with their mentees, some mentors reflected on the weight of responsibility for mentoring, indicating they had taken the workshop and its contents seriously. They seemed committed to the role, seeing it as important and potentially rewarding.

[I saw this as an] opportunity to be in something very positive and rewarding... I realised I would need to develop an understanding of the different backgrounds of my first year students to be able to communicate and help them to their needs. Developing a relationship and identifying with each of my group members will be essential. (FJ)

I saw the overview of the meeting and realised [it was] laden with responsibility… I was quite surprised with the discussion in the room about academic skills as each mentor seemed to discuss a critical awakening in the first/second year where they realised the importance of their studies. (WB)

Keeping in mind the high proportion of mature-aged students in the mentees, one of the younger mentors felt intimidated by his group of mentees. However, he was able to translate a potentially intimidating experience into an opportunity. He did this by reflecting on the importance of building capacity within the group by linking his group to others. He enacted shared guidance where the “teacher” and student work together (Ten Cate et al., 2004):

[My] mentees [are] all mature-age students. I feel a little overwhelmed and have a little self-doubt as they are all older than me. I am getting ready for a million questions... [They are] interested in getting to know the members of other groups so they can extend their network community, so I will discuss this with a couple of the other mentors then take it right across the board eventually if other groups are keen to do so. (WB)

Personal approaches to mentoring
Mentors’ personal approaches to mentoring varied but the need for effective communication and the use of technology with their mentees was a strong theme. Mentors initially planned to meet with their mentees on a weekly basis; some met one-on-one while others met in group situations, still others used technologically-enhanced ways of getting together (email, text messaging, and mobile phones). The value and convenience of email was apparent.

I have been [on field experience in other town]. I sent group emails to my MATES to keep in touch. [Students] had academic enquiries while I was away – structuring assignments, correct referencing styles, effective study habits for exams, tutors they didn’t like. Email proved an effective medium for these discussions and issues were successfully dealt with. (KM)

For some, a creative contact approach, using mobile phone technology was the most effective, along with an awareness that some mentees might not like constant reminders about meetings.

After emails, unanswered phone calls and cancelled meeting opportunities, the SMS messaging approach seemed to be most effective... I got in touch with my group’s members, eventually, through SMS messaging and this got me thinking. Am I putting extra stress on these students by nagging them about meeting me? (FJ)

A practical approach to familiarising students with the physical environment of the university was part of every group. Most mentors incorporated practical tasks, such as orienting their mentees to university and teaching and learning spaces and library facilities.

Next week we are going to the library and I have made a little activity for everyone… research skills…. (JS)

Meeting at the library next Tuesday. I will take them on a tour of the library and help out with photocopying cards, database searches, email and QUT Virtual. (KM)

The three of us took a trip to a computer lab room to run through the basics of a search on the database… I shall contact her in a few days to see how the search went. The database search
that I showed her last week had been successful and she was confident in extracting journal articles. (CP)

Two mentors used an approach characterised by scaffolding by using their own note taking and assignment work as exemplars for the mentees. In guiding the students with respect to standards of work, these mentors shared their assignments and spoke of their own experiences upon commencing university.

I actually took along an assignment of mine for them all to look at, and they are making copies among themselves. I have also encouraged the girls to form a study group with each other so they can discuss their issues as a group first, then contact me. I think it is important for them to try and find a solution among themselves, as I think this serves for more understanding and learning, rather than just getting the answer from me. (JS)

I brought along my portfolio and prac folders to share. [Student’s name] was very grateful ... [it] enabled her to prepare for these experiences. [Student’s name] was concerned with the structuring of academic assignments…. My portfolio and prac folders were great for stimulating conversation and [Student’s name] later said they motivated her to edit her work because she knew she could achieve better. (KM)

To foster self-regulated learning, another mentor modelled study group formation and provided individual tutoring.

We are going to be having study sessions as meetings leading up to exams and the group seem really happy with this, the group aren’t ready yet to meet solo for their study sessions. ...

[Student’s name] was having trouble with her referencing correctly, I had a separate meeting with her where I checked a marked paper and helped to show her where she went wrong. (WB)

Mentors were conscious that their approach needed to be encouraging and supportive. Overall, there seemed to be capacity building and rapport building with mentees that grew from encouragement and advice given by mentors.

It is quite interesting how you become protective and take them under your wing, it is important to see them do well and I feel like I need to help them succeed. (WB)
I have spent today meeting with my MATES individually at various places on campus. … there was plenty of lively discussion. (KM)

Benefits of mentoring

As the semester progressed, mentors recognised the positive social aspects of the process of mentoring. They saw that the social dimension created a type of support that may not be achieved in other ways.

I think our meetings have turned into more of a social gathering now which is good. (JS)

[Student’s name] said she had spent quite a bit of time crying, and then all the other girls piped up and said they had too… This was a really good way of bringing them together and forming a support group that was not solely about study. They really were feeling overwhelmed with it all, and to have five other people to talk to eased that. (JS)

Mentors wrote about the rewarding nature of mentoring; for example, mentees often expressed gratitude for their mentor’s support. As time went on, assignments were completed successfully by the mentees who provided positive feedback to the mentors. The mentors documented that their mentees grew in confidence and enthusiasm. This was a satisfying experience for mentors as they felt a sense of satisfaction and self-worth (Gilles & Wilson, 2004).

It was so rewarding to feel the support is accepted with such gratitude… She is appreciative of the moral support and wants to stay talking as long as possible…we had a great 2 hours together on Wednesday, just talking about our life experiences... I felt she still enjoyed the friendship and support. (CP)

It was also apparent that reciprocity occurred for mentors and mentees. There was a sense that mentoring “works both ways”: mentors grew personally and professionally through the mentorship, friendships developed, resulting in positive outcomes.

I have made some great friends out of this and have been able to organise and motivate myself better as well. (JS)
The benefits I hope to achieve for myself as mentor will be to improve well-being, facilitate self-management, satisfaction, develop social ties and achieve lifestyle goals. (CP)

[Student’s name] is really becoming engrossed with uni and is very enthusiastic. She has helped me with my arts subject which has been great for her to know this mentoring thing works both ways. I meet every Tuesday with [Student’s name] and we discuss a lot, and this has been a two way situation. (JG)

Frustrations of mentoring

Mentors experienced several frustrations throughout the mentoring experience. As foregrounded earlier, the main frustration centred on the difficulty of establishing and maintaining contact with mentees, and scheduling meetings at mutually convenient times.

It is becoming obvious that it will be very difficult to get everyone together at the one time so I think I may have to see them in two sessions... Their timetables just don’t seem to match up to each other’s at all. (LH)

Three separate meetings had to be scheduled on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. This has been hard on me because I have had to come to uni at times I would not usually be here, and go over the same information a number of times. (RF)

At this stage only two mentees have contacted me even though I have emailed them all regularly and left messages. I have given them all an overview of my personal and academic life, just to break the ice. Additionally, I emailed them my weekly timetable, semester planner and contact details, so all have access to my availability. (JG)

One mentor questioned the size of the groups, suggesting that the assignment of five mentees was overwhelming and too time consuming, particularly in negotiating common times to meet.

It would be more appropriate to have one or two first year students allocated to a 4th year student. Having 5 students was too much to keep up with as well as your own studies. Not many students would meet together at the same time, often one at a time sometimes two. This made it difficult to work around the mentees’ timetable and my timetable. (CP)
Mentors took very seriously signs of mentee disengagement, such as repeatedly missing meetings, not responding to repeated calls or email contacts, and not acknowledging attempts to encourage them. All mentors mentioned loss of contact with one or several of their mentees.

I have not been able to contact [Student’s name] at all and have not had much contact with [Student’s name] for the past month. We arranged to call each other however this did not happen and I have not had any replies from my emails... I have found the mentoring experience to be frustrating, trying to contact people, making arrangements and things not coming together. (JG)

The tax on mentors’ time was one of the drawbacks of mentoring. Despite their early enthusiasm and commitment, all but one of the mentors felt that mentoring was even more time consuming than they had anticipated. The unexpected time commitment and awareness of mentee disengagement led to some mentors to doubting their own preparation and capabilities. However, these frustrations provided the opportunity to learn about organisational aspects of mentoring as well as to examine their own approaches to time management.

I believe [Student’s name] has left uni to pursue work with the use of her TAFE [qualification]. However I do feel I should have followed closer with phone calls when she never replied to the numerous calls. (CP)

This week [Student’s name] came to the meeting, having had a minor mental breakdown and was in the process of dropping a subject. I was under the impression that I had made myself available for exactly this kind of crisis, but apparently not enough. ... I think I may need to start calling for updates in between meetings. (JS)

Discussion

The key messages from this inquiry into the mentors’ experiences relate to mentor preparation or induction, personal approaches to mentoring, and the benefits and frustrations of mentoring. Here we discuss each in turn before returning to Ten Cate and colleagues’
(2004) model to theorise improvements to the mentoring program which will be implemented in future offerings. Final remarks relate to lessons learned from examining mentors’ perspectives.

Preparation for mentoring is important. The results of this study indicate that the workshop training preparation was not only beneficial for the purpose of mentoring first-year students, but it had a flow-on effect to the mentors’ own third- and fourth-year student experience. Mentors developed greater awareness of their own study skills and processes during the workshop. This self-awareness has the potential to lead to improved self-esteem and confidence (Drew et al., 2000), and a more self-regulated approach to learning. In turn, mentors’ personal capacity may establish constructive friction (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999) by promoting the appropriate balance between guidance and self-regulation within mentor groups. Some mentors explored their own university experiences in light of the induction-into-mentoring workshop, leading to further personal growth. Such personal development has skill spin-offs that will be valuable for their future professional practice (Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003).

Differing personal approaches to mentoring can be expected. However, some approaches were more effective than others (Rolfe-Flett, 2000). Studies have shown that particular characteristics of mentors are more conducive to successful mentoring. For example, Mee-Lee and Bush (2003) noted four desirable characteristics as being understanding and empathy; accessibility to students; well developed communication skills; and enthusiasm. Many of the mentors in the present study exhibited these characteristics, resulting in their ability to quickly develop rapport with mentees. The mentors also practised a multi-dimensional approach to mentoring by supporting academic as well as social and orientation activities for mentees. They used various combinations of practical group and targeted individual interventions. According to Fowler (2004) and Drew et al. (2000), this multi-dimensional approach fosters decreased stress and improved self-esteem and confidence.
in students, leading to enhanced study techniques, and, therefore, more positive engagement with coursework. Increased self-esteem and confidence are intrinsically beneficial for both mentors and mentees.

According to Tinto (2000, cited in Darlaston-Jones et al., 2001), bridging academic demands and social needs of students results in decreased attrition and improved academic performance. Social as well as academic aspects of the mentoring program were important for mentors and mentees. Throughout the semester, many positive social support activities occurred in the mentoring program. Social support processes can facilitate first-year students discussing their progress in relation to workload and coping strategies (Muldoon, 2004). In the present study, mentors also benefited from the social interaction with their mentees. Similarly, mentors and mentees benefited from academic support, mentees from the support of their mentors and other mentees, and mentors form the training in the workshop. Social as well as academic aspects in the present mentoring program meant that mentoring was a two-way process and allowed for personal as well as cognitive growth for both mentors and mentees.

While the mentoring program produced many positive outcomes, the mentors also experienced frustrations. Most significantly, these included worrying over failing to engage with particular mentees and difficulties with contacting them. As a result, three mentors lost focus and doubted their role. All but one also stated they felt the experience was more time consuming than had been anticipated. Limited time for mentoring was noted by Mee-Lee and Bush (2003) as affecting the quality and depth of intervention. These frustrating issues indicate a need to adjust recruitment and selection processes by conducting more thorough interviews with prospective mentors to obtain a comprehensive picture of their time commitments overall. Selecting mentors with strong academic backgrounds and already well-developed organisational and time management skills (Weisz & Kemlo, 2004) might contribute to the quality of the mentors. At an institutional level, building in time for
mentoring might be achieved by scheduling a two-hour period in the mentors’ and mentees’ timetables, in between classes, that may create greater opportunities for group meetings at mutually convenient times. Methods of providing support for mentors in the form of electronic communication and other forms of support offered by program leaders should be explored in future research.

Within the four themes, we identified instances where mentors used intervention strategies enabling them to work within the LOT model’s three learning-process components; that is, the cognitive level involving provision of relevant information; the affective level involving motivating students to study; and the metacognitive level involving teaching the “how to” of study/learn (Ten Cate et al., 2004). We were struck by how readily mentors engaged with the interplay of these three factors: cognitive, affective, and metacognitive. This is exemplified in the following mentors’ reflections.

We are going to be having study sessions as meetings leading up to exams and the group seem really happy with this, the group aren’t ready yet to meet solo for their study sessions [Metacognitive – awareness of group capabilities and preparation needed; also evidence of moving the mentees to self-regulated learning, but not yet]. … Student was having trouble with her referencing correctly, I had a separate meeting with her where I checked a marked paper with her and helped to show her where she went wrong [Metacognitive – support in how to write a paper/study]. (WB)

Next week we are going to the library and I have made a little activity for everyone…. research skills [Metacognitive – study skills activity].… After next week I will start the check up calls. Not only does this let the girls have a one-on-one audience to air their grievances, but it reinforces the fact that I am available, and have the time and inclination to listen and help them [Affective – preparedness to mentor]. (JS)

Without seeming to be aware of this, mentors reflected in a relational manner by integrating levels, for example, by linking affective or metacognitive aspects of mentoring with the cognitive content their mentees were studying. In some instances, the cognitive
dimension of mentoring had links to their own learning, in particular, through their training as mentors. For example:

I also learned a great deal. The computing session of the seminar was of particular interest, as web pages I didn’t even know existed, were introduced to me. Not only will this information be useful to me in my studies [Cognitive – learning content useful to studying], but I also feel better equipped [Affective – motivated to mentor] to provide the new students with useful and accurate information. … I have experienced the transition from TAFE to university first hand, so I am confident [Affective] that I can assist them in settling in. (RF)

Mentoring was a powerful learning experience for these mentors. In analysing their reflections, however, we began to wonder how their status as students in an early childhood teacher preparation program influenced their capacity to design learning interventions. Were they unconsciously adapting and applying generic teaching skills and principles they had learned so far in their teacher education to the task of mentoring? If so, might teacher education students make better mentors than students from other faculties where learning about learning is not such a focus?

Given the mentors’ propensity to simultaneously engage with mentees in the three learning-process components (cognitive, affective, and metacognitive), we adapted Ten Cate and colleagues’ (2004) LOT model (see Figure 1) to develop a tentative model of mentoring, reflecting the interplay of levels in the mentoring process for both mentors and mentees. Figure 1 depicts the proposed mentoring model as being framed by affective dimensions that the mentors reported experiencing, such as initially having a desire and the confidence to mentor and to take on the responsibility. Other affective aspects included: good health, a positive attitude and general wellbeing. Mentors also stated feeling protective of their mentees and having a desire to support them. The capacity to cope was sometimes challenged and self-doubt was evident; however, at the conclusion, mentors stated that the experience was rewarding. Cognitive aspects of university study were continually influenced by growth
in metacognitive study skills, and the inter-relationship between cognitive and metacognitive levels is depicted as an ongoing cycle. Metacognitive aspects related to helping mentees develop correct writing/referencing skills, organising study groups, discussion of content, sharing ideas, finding solutions and researching information. This tentative model will inform our subsequent work with mentors and mentees and provide us with a direction for future research.

Figure 1. A relational model of mentoring, including affective, cognitive and metacognitive dimensions.

Conclusion

To date, there has been little research exploring how mentors perceive their experiences of mentoring. In this study we considered it important to explore their views to inform future training of mentors, and provide ongoing support for the mentors to participate effectively in the program. The mentors documented their experiences in written reflections, which shed light on their feelings and competencies as mentors. Analysis of their reflections
formed the basis for our development of a relational model of mentoring, depicting learning for both mentors and mentees throughout the experience. The main contribution of this study, therefore, has been to explore mentoring from the mentors’ perspectives and to develop a model for mentoring which will inform future mentoring programs.

If we are to effectively orient and support first-year students in their transition to university study, we must seriously consider mentoring as an effective and sustainable option. Future mentoring programs should consider presenting a model for mentoring as part of induction-into-mentoring rather than using it only as a backcloth to the development of program content. The model proposed here will help mentors understand the integrated nature of mentoring and the importance of affective, cognitive and metacognitive components. We suggest that a mentor induction should first identify and acknowledge the affective dimensions associated with mentoring before focusing on more cognitive and metacognitive tasks. Mentors need to be aware of their own reasons for embarking upon the mentoring role and the inherent responsibility. They should also be prepared to face uncertainties and possible self doubt. At the same time, they need to know where to find help and resources. Metacognitive dimensions of mentoring such as preparing study skills activities, searching literature, and university orientation should be conducted with the knowledge that such skills influence interaction with course content, or the cognitive aspects of mentoring. The efficacy of such an approach could be explored in future research.

The question regarding whether teacher education students make better mentors than others because of what they already know about learning, and unconsciously apply during mentoring is raised here. This intriguing possibility can also be explored in inter-faculty comparative research.
Ten Cate and colleagues (2004) describe three different levels of guidance in learning: full external guidance from the teacher only; shared guidance where the teacher and student work together; and full internal guidance where the students regulate their own learning independently of the teacher. Although untested in our research to date, we suggest that mentors might also benefit from learning explicitly about these levels and how they can apply them within their roles as mentors to foster productive learning and contribute to a positive university experience for first year students. Further exploration of the efficacy of these proposals can be explored in future research.

References

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