

# Networked mentoring: a natural extension of self-directed learning

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## Abstract

The responsibility of tertiary institutions is to prepare students in such a way that they enact authentic, effective and evolving practices throughout their careers. To achieve this, teaching and learning, including teacher education, have changed in recent years. 21<sup>st</sup> Century pedagogies are increasingly premised on principles of personalised learning that occur with others and in context; evolving understandings of inclusion and diversity; and a culture of self-directed, inquiry-based and lifelong learning (Bolstad et al., 2012). What counts as knowledge has shifted to encompass the collective views, intuitions and beliefs of participants (Dede, 2008, in Li, 2012). In keeping with these changes, there is never 'one right answer', and an increased need to co-author understandings with others.

Models of supervision have not kept pace with networked approaches to learning, and traditional models persist. Professional supervision continues to be framed as a dyadic interaction, usually conducted face-to-face by one expert and one novice. The present study acknowledges the place of traditional supervision, but argues that networked learning begets a framework for networked mentoring. Networked mentoring supports professionals in considering the learning and support they both give and receive at each layer of their ecology. Learning is thus seen as "the product of educational self-organisation. If you allow the educational process to self-organise, then learning emerges. It's not about making learning happen; it's about letting it happen." (Mitra, 2013, 16:32).

In contrast with traditional approaches to mentoring, networked mentoring positions each teacher at the center of their ecology, intentionally and spontaneously recognising opportunities for learning with, from and about others. Teachers are empowered as the people best placed to solve their own problems and identify their own solutions in bespoke and networked ways. The role of the mentor shifts to supporting others to identify, cultivate and sustain their existing and potential networks: their sources of learning on- and off- line, in and out of their formal learning environments.

The focus of this paper is research conducted on networked mentoring within one postgraduate programme in which teachers are encouraged and supported to take charge of their learning and then their networks of support. Key principles and pedagogies within the programme are outlined, to set the stage for the study of networked mentoring.

**Key words:** networked mentoring, self-directed learning, communities of practice

## Research context and background: one postgraduate programme

The late-modern age is one of globalisation; rapid innovation and technology; international travel and migration, and the loss of community, all of which require people who can cope with change, effect change within themselves and adopt new identities (Tedder, 2009). In an inclusive education context in particular, many of the same dispositions are required as teachers continually reinvent their practices in order to minimise the barriers to full participation for all learners. Life-long and life-wide, "inclusive pedagogy [is] an aspect of teacher professional knowledge which begins with initial teacher education and continues throughout the teacher's career" (Florian & Graham, 2014, p. 466). Embracing this, teachers are more likely to create non-disabling contexts when they care for every student, embrace diversity and difference, reflect on their practice and their impact, and stay open to new learning (Disley, 2009).

Participants in the present study are enrolled in a national postgraduate programme for experienced teachers and other professionals working in the field of inclusive education. The programme, first developed in 2010, offers advanced qualifications to experienced teachers with endorsements in Autism Spectrum Disorder, Blind and

Low Vision, Complex Educational Needs, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Early Intervention, Gifted and Talented, and Learning and Behaviour. A blended learning approach, combining face-to-face opportunities with online study, allows for the flexibility and accessibility required by a geographically diverse student body, as well as the face-to-face contact beneficial for interprofessional networking. The programme has a strong focus on self-directed and networked learning, whereby students identify their own learning needs and professional goals against a set of competencies, supplement course materials with information from their on- and off-line networks and their practice, and demonstrate their growth through ePortfolios.

Students in the postgraduate programme are typically experienced teachers exchanging the classroom for itinerant roles as specialist teachers. As such, they will work in a range of roles supporting classroom teachers to implement inclusive and ecological approaches to enhance the presence, participation and learning of all children and young people. These roles bring with them new challenges and opportunities, such as the increased scope to work within and across schools and communities with a range of other professionals from the education and health sectors.

This group of students is often mid-career, typically practicing full-time alongside their study, and balancing work and study with family commitments to both younger children and aging parents. For a high proportion of students, their professional role is new, and the study is stipulated as part of their employment conditions. Many students completed their initial degrees some time ago. New to blended learning, and initially uncomfortable with self-directed learning, they look to their lecturers for guidance on 21st Century learning alongside the knowledge and skills of their profession.

### **“Take charge of your learning”**

The programme’s constructivist pedagogy is underpinned by Marlowe and Page’s (2005) four key tenets:

1. Learning involves constructing, rather than receiving, knowledge
2. Understanding and applying knowledge are more important than recalling information
3. Thinking and analysing are more important than amassing facts
4. Learners are active rather than passive

As part of the programme’s climate of experiential and inquiry-based learning, students learn through cycles of action and reflection, gaining knowledge, skills along with self-understanding (Schön, 1983). Students have access to a ‘smorgasbord’ of content. After setting learning goals based on self-assessment of their individual and contextual needs, and in relation to course competencies, each student designs a bespoke learning plan which draws from the content and activities most relevant to them. “This self-directed and inquiry-based learning is central to the programme as it allows for differentiated, relevant and meaningful learning and engagement” (Mentis et al., 2016, p. 68).

Taking charge of their personalised curriculum ensures students’ learning is always appropriate, authentic and contextualised. The process develops professional wisdom and identity alongside the skills teachers need in managing practice dilemmas. In the process, teachers shift away from rules-based decision-making, which is predicated on external and predetermined guidance and has obvious limitations in a constantly shifting education context. They embrace principles-based decision making, by contrast, which supports their lifelong learning and adaptive practice and gives them the competence and confidence to practice effectively in evolving contexts. This rationale is consistent with Derrida (2003, in Murray, Holmes, Perron, & Rail, 2008) who argues for principles (ethics) “because ... there is no rule. There are ethics because I have to *invent* the rule; and there would be no responsibility if I knew the rule...That’s where responsibility starts, when I *don’t* know what to do” (p. 685). As such, self-directed and lifelong learning engenders professionals who negotiate the demands on their practice in ways that serve their others and themselves effectively.

## **Learning through communities of practice (CoP)**

Students in the current programme learn about and experience interprofessional CoP, conceptualised as groups who share concerns, problems and passions, and extend their knowledge through their ongoing interaction (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Wenger describes CoP as "a dynamic, two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate" (2000, p. 227). There is a continual and reciprocal process of individual learning and development and the reshaping of workplace practices and cultures (Collin et al., 2008, p. 193). In a genuine CoP, participants find an intrinsic value in connections that informally bind them to the group. Their ongoing engagement in the community yields common practices, knowledge and a unique collective perspective on their area of practice. CoP potentially develop personal and professional relationships, shared norms and both individual and group identities (Wenger et al., 2002).

In their study of workplace learning and identity formation, Collin et al. (2008) identify social support as the greatest enabler, and lack of support as the greatest barrier. These authors stipulate the need for what they term a sense of 'we-ness' - which encapsulates competence, emotional solidarity and agency - and is contingent on active engagement in the community. "This implies that the lack of active membership acts as a serious constraint not only on social togetherness but also on learning at work" (p. 205). The authors note that working together, feeling valued and having opportunities to gain information - all of which happen naturally in CoP - enable learning and identity.

Within the programme, an infrastructure for communities of practice has been developed according to the tenets put forth by Wenger et al. (2002) and the principles of biculturally responsive practice (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Students are invited to participate in these local, face-to-face groups focused on the sharing of interprofessional knowledge and skills as well as pastoral care. These groups are called *whānau* (family) support groups, to connote naturally forming groups where individual member take on positions and "fulfil different functions oriented towards the collaborative concerns, interests and benefits of the *whānau* as a group, rather than towards the benefit of any one member" (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p. 172). They are also encouraged to identify the full range of communities in which they engage, and how each of these shapes their learning and identity.

### **"Take charge of your mentoring"**

To collaborate effectively within and across communities of practice, professionals must actively break down the barriers between professionals practicing in different areas and by working in ways that intentionally disrupt silos of practice and knowledge (Mentis et al., 2016). The programme has as its mantra *learning with, from and about* to represent the ways interprofessional learning strengthens interprofessional practice, which is seen as "key to providing collaborative communities for integrated inclusive education practices" (Mentis et al., 2016, p. 67). Students in the programme "valued others within and across specialist areas as a source of learning, alongside the formal course content. Learning together resulted in increased confidence and competence to practice more effectively together" (p. 74).

Taking charge of one's mentoring is thus a natural extension of self-directed learning. The programme's approach to networked mentoring builds on Annan and Ryba's (2013) work with educational psychologists, in which they map the formal and non-formal ways professionals meet the overarching goals of professional supervision in contemporary ways. Specifically, these authors challenge dyadic supervision as a primary form of mentoring, arguing that professionals more authentically meet the three overarching goals of professional development, support and accountability through their communities of practice.

In the first year of the programme, students are scaffolded in self-directed and networked learning. They also explore and enact Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory as a way to consider the mutually constitutive layers of a child's environment and how this influences their work to support that child/system. They consider the children and families they support using this framework, and increasingly use the framework to consider their own lives as well.

In their second year, they extend this stance by taking charge of their support networks. Students, who are also professionals typically working full-time in the field, consider the competencies they will need to meet over the course of the full-year practicum. They consider themselves, in terms of their own

strengths and needs, interests and learning goals. They then consider their contexts, the space on- and off- line where they might be able to give and receive support. Mentoring is thus framed as a reciprocal process of supporting others, face-to-face and online with students within and across endorsements.

There are several distinctions in this approach. The first is the reciprocal nature of mentoring, in which expertise is task-dependent and context-specific; thus mentor partners continually shift between learner and teacher. The second is the intentional way that mentors map their supports, in all of their on- and off- line spaces, blurring the personal and professional as well as formal and informal as they co-construct and connect the spaces of their learning.

## Research design

To explore student perspectives of networked mentoring a survey was sent out to participants at every layer of the postgraduate programme's ecology at the end of 2016. This included the Practicum students themselves, as well as the whānau group facilitators and the Masters students mentoring online in the practicum as part of their own coursework. The survey explored their identity as students, mentors and lifelong learners. They rated their confidence in taking charge of their learning and their network of supports, and articulated the ways they constructed these ideas. Participants identified their networks of support within and beyond the programme.

Preliminary findings from an inductive thematic analysis of the findings will be discussed, including participants' perspectives of self-directed learning through networked mentoring and the implications for tertiary education. Participants identified the positive influence of networked mentoring on their professional and interprofessional identities, motivation and self-efficacy, and on-going communities of interprofessional practice. Tensions were also identified, as participants straddled networked and more traditional approaches to mentoring. For mentors, these tensions included role clarity, worry they weren't doing enough to directly support students, and the pull towards less networked practices (e.g. emailing students individually rather than generating conversation in online, collaborative forums).

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