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# **Calling to mentor: The search for mentor identity through the development of mentor competency**

## ***Abstract***

There is a common assumption that experienced educators will automatically be effective mentors. My experience indicates that building competence in mentoring others requires conscious intent and effort. This article is a self-study action research account that explores mentoring practice from the mentor's perspective. The study sets to explore the relational dynamics within mentoring relationships, with the focus of obtaining a deeper understanding of the mentor's growth and the impact of this learning on mentor identity. Data collection was through personal reflective journals, mentoring conversations and focus group interviews. Findings indicate that critical reflective practice can lead to transformational learning that results in personal and professional growth and improved mentor competency. Transformative learning episodes highlight significant learning points that converge to enhance personal and professional learning and contribute to the formulation of mentor identity. A conclusion drawn is that applying a personal strategic intent towards mentor development can lead to improved mentoring culture and organisational learning and growth.

**Key Words:** Action Research; Mentor identity; Mentor development; Personal and Professional development; Reflective practice; Self-study

## **Introduction**

Mentoring is prevalent in higher education as a way of supporting educators to achieve personal and professional objectives. A significant value of mentoring is its ability to provide educators with a sense of competence that formulates their identity (Kram 1988). The outcomes of mentoring can however only be as good as the mentor's competency. Consequently, mentor development is an important aspect of mentoring practice.

This paper shares my personal and professional learning and development as a mentor and through this learning, explores the search for my mentor identity. I offer a perspective of learning to mentor in real time while experiencing mentoring relationships. In my account, I apply Whitehead's (1989) living theory, an action research approach that empowers practitioners to embark on a value directed exploration of their practice, helps them recognise themselves as a living contradiction, and embraces the notion of the self being an integral part of the research process. I acknowledge the fundamental differences on how the mentoring phenomenon is interpreted and performed across disciplines (see e.g. Haggard et al. 2011) and situate my study in a general Higher Education environment. My project was a self-study action research inquiry (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; McNiff 2013; Whitehead 1989) involving three individuals (myself as mentor and researcher and my two mentees). As participants in the study, each one of us influenced one another and was influenced by our shared experiences. Without diminishing the key importance of the mentees' learning, the study sets to explore the relational dynamics within the relationships, with the focus of obtaining a deeper understanding of the mentor's growth and the impact of this learning on mentor identity.

Providing a theoretical underpinning to this paper are learning approaches relevant and appropriate for mentoring relationships, offering insight into the concept of reflective practice and adult learning. Thus the works of Mezirow (1981, 1991) who was essentially concerned with transformative learning and critical self-reflection; Daloz's (2012) work on personal learning within mentoring practice; and Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice that enable professionals reach increased self-awareness converge to provide a foundation for communicating my experiences and discussions.

## **Mentor development**

This study takes the view that a mentoring relationship is a co-learning environment where mutual learning and social exchange occurs between the mentor and the mentee (Allen et al. 1997; Grima et al. 2014). Although mentoring relationships focus on the learning and development of mentees, mentors also develop whilst experiencing mentoring relationships (Kram 1983). The learning gained by mentors can be transformative in nature, directly impacting and enhancing mentoring practice (Castanheira 2016; Daloz 2012; Ghosh et al. 2013; Langdon 2014; Rekha and Ganesh 2012; Wyre 2016), and the knowledge gained from the process can lead to new understandings and innovative ways of enhancing practice.

Mentor development is however challenging in practice. The learning that takes place is often uncoordinated and unacknowledged by the mentor. If any organisational training is carried out at all, it is often inadequate or untargeted toward the mentoring process (Wyre et al. 2016). This may be because capacity to mentor is often viewed as self-evident. The overarching assumption in Higher Education is that senior educators will automatically effectively mentor their junior counterparts. Not all educators however, are predisposed to mentor others (Wang et al. 2009), and will need strategies on how to achieve requisite competencies. The mentor role is complex and multifaceted, with each relationship requiring a constellation of different attributes required at different depths and capacities depending on circumstances, contexts and anticipated outcomes (Cohen 1995; Daloz 2012; Langdon 2014). Regardless of the anticipated mentorship outcomes, the onus remains on the mentor to ensure they can effectively deliver their mentoring responsibilities by acquiring the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to execute their role effectively. Mentors who desire to guide another's learning and development must therefore focus on enhancing their mentoring

attributes. Becoming an effective mentor requires a conscious and purposeful effort at developing the requisite competencies (Orland-Barak and Hasin 2010). The objective of becoming better can be achieved by developing through conscious, deliberate and continuous learning. This continuous improvement process is akin to deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer 1993), a process that goes beyond serendipitous accumulation of experience and involves targeting a challenging well-defined task and improving it through numerous opportunities for practice (Ericsson et al. 1993). Time, effort, intrinsic motivation and intent are essential to achieve such a goal (Ericsson 2006).

Engaging in effective mentorship has potential to increase self-efficacy and effectiveness (Kram 1988), and expand a professional's repertoire of skills and competencies. Effective mentors have to be able to maintain interpersonal relations and motivate mentees to achieve planned goals. Rowley (1999) suggests a good mentor is one that is an on-going learner who is open to diverse views of thinking and always ready to seek professional growth. Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010) list organisational skills, interpersonal relationships, integration of theory and practice, knowledge and expertise, challenge, modelling and reflexivity as competencies that a good mentor should possess. Johnson (2003) presents a comprehensive framework that outlines a broad variety of attributes including virtues, abilities, knowledge and skills and concludes that being a good mentor goes beyond the sum of single identified attributes. Johnson's work suggests the discharge of effective mentoring depends on the dynamic interplay between constellations of various attributes that contribute to making the mentor who they are. These attributes converge to formulate mentor competency. The skilful way that the mentor manages and integrates this complex set of diverse attributes in discharging the mentoring role translates to their behaviour, and therefore defines their identity as a mentor.

## **Mentor Identity**

Mentor identity can be socially constructed through life experiences and through communication about those experiences (Daloz 2012). Ibarra (1999) defines identity as an enduring set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences by which people define themselves. The perceptive meaning people attach to the different roles they play as they interact with others in different settings influences identity (Daloz 2012). Thus, identity is informed by internal and external perspectives of the self.

Similarly, mentoring is a social-culturally constructed phenomenon (Daloz 2012). It does not take place in a vacuum, but is a lived practice that occurs in a social-cultural environment. Within this environment, we bring ourselves into mentoring practice, including our values, beliefs, and perspectives. Our identity evidences our authenticity and demonstrates the values, beliefs and perspectives we espouse as we perform our roles as mentors, making who we are an integral aspect of mentoring practice. Few studies delve into how mentor identity is formulated. Those that have concur that the focus on constructing one's mentor identity contributes to enduring mentor motives (see, e.g., Bullough [2005] and Mysyk [2008]). Formulating my mentor identity is therefore fundamental to becoming a good mentor.

Potential for learning in mentor-mentee interactions is contextual, impacted by prevailing variables present in each relationship (Cohen 1995; Daloz 2012; Langdon 2014). The shared experiences and interactions with mentees fundamentally contributes to the development of my identity. My identity evolves, changing as I encounter different mentoring experiences within my practice. Mentor identity is therefore a process of being and becoming, shaped by the interactions between my self-image and the perceptions I hold of how mentees view me.

The mentoring relationships provide transformational learning environments in practice enabling me to reach deeper understanding of myself, thus making the self central to my learning and development.

### **Transformative learning**

Mentoring relationships are experiential collaborative opportunities for transformative learning to take place (Daloz 2012). Transformative learning is a way of learning that provides opportunity to challenge deeply held attitudes and beliefs, and offers deep learning that is both active and reflective and leads to acceptance of new perspectives (Mezirow 1991). Mezirow highlights the practical nature of transformative adult learning, defining it as:

the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow 1981, 6)

Critical self-reflection is central to transformative learning (Mezirow 1991). Through transformative learning adults can recognise developmental gaps in their social-cultural relationships and understand why these gaps exist. The developmental process occurs through incidences that demonstrate how we make meanings of our experiences in relation to others. Unravelling these experiences is assisted by critical reflection - a process of illuminating unquestioned assumptions through paying attention to dissatisfactions, tensions and contradictions in experience (Schön 1983). Critical reflection goes beyond simply thinking about practice, and requires iterative thinking processes between observation, analysis and action (Mezirow 1991). Conceptual knowledge and experiential learning combine within this

process to result in recognisable critical incidences within practice. Attempting to make sense of these experiences through the process of critical reflections transforms particular episodes into learning moments. Transformation occurs when, as a result of an experience, there is a realisation of learning in action...an 'aha' moment of awareness, when it suddenly dawns on you that a change has occurred in your perspective, and this realisation leads you to initiate corrective actions that result in incremental personal and professional development.

From the onset of the mentoring relationships, assisted by my self-study action research design (Nyanjom 2018) I embraced reflective practice as a medium for self-evaluation that would lead to growth. I had not only to reflect critically, but also to articulate my learning and recognise it as a learning episode with potential for growth. Specifically, the situations that brought tension and uncertainty became catalysts for transformation. The process of analysis made possible by critical reflections helped me recognise the competencies that could potentially construct my mentor identity and assist me improve my mentoring practice.

### **Context and Methods**

In this paper, I draw data from a comprehensive self-study action research project whose structure has been reported in previous work (Nyanjom 2018). The self-study addressed the question 'How can I improve my mentoring practice?' The idea to pursue this line of inquiry originated when the vocational education and training institution that I was working as a Head of Department embarked on a challenging quality assurance implementation program. The implementation of this program created an opportunity to provide informal developmental assistance sought by less experienced colleagues within the institution. Mutual rapport began to emerge between myself and other colleagues. During this time, I realised I was in effect a mentor to my less experienced colleagues. I began to formulate the idea of

how I could improve my mentoring practice within this context, and realised a self-study action research project would achieve developmental objectives for all participants.

I then designed the project composed of me as the mentor and two mentees, with two main goals. The first goal was to support and guide my less experienced colleagues within my institution to achieve their developmental objectives, whilst simultaneously providing data for research purposes. The second goal was to initiate a self-study developmental process to improve my mentoring practice. With these two goals in mind, I purposively approached two of my colleagues with whom we had already gained some mutual rapport, to join me on the project, and they agreed to participate with the expectation of personal and professional development. One mentee was a 40-year-old male (W) while the other was a 29-year-old female (M). I viewed the mentees as partners in the project endeavour and from the onset, it was clear to all of us that we would be co-learners on our mentoring journey, symbiotically learning from one another.

Our relationships were a hybrid type of mentoring falling somewhere between informal type of mentoring - when two people spontaneously cultivate a relationship, with both parties selecting and pursuing the resulting connections; and formal mentoring - which is created through the formal assignment of pairs, as through an institutional assisted mentoring program. I viewed the initial informal formation of our relationships as positive to the project. This is because our relationships had the strength of informal mentoring (as there was mutual identification and attraction prior to formalisation), as well as the advantages of formal mentoring (as the project would provide a clear framework within which the mentoring relationships could operate). I designed a structured approach to a two semester (6 month) mentoring project incorporating Megginson et al 's (2006) five phases of mentoring

relationship development (Nyanjom 2018), and as part of this process the mentees and I created individual personal development plans to guide us.

Whilst the overarching action research project focused on the learning and development of the individuals involved in the study, my personal development as the researcher was an important outcome. I had the three roles of being a mentor, a learner, and an action researcher. As a mentor, my objective was to assist my mentees achieve their set developmental goals. As a learner, the aim of my research was to increase my mentoring capacity and improve my practice through critical reflection. As a researcher, my objective was to monitor, evaluate and reflect upon the research component of the action research process. My research outcomes included the collection of rigorous data using action research cycles that would enable me address my research question adequately (Nyanjom 2018). Data collection was through personal reflective journals maintained by both the mentees and myself; taped and transcribed weekly face-to-face mentoring conversations between myself and each of my mentees; classroom observations, and videoed focus group interviews conducted with the mentees by a peer not involved in the mentoring project, in my absence.

In my reporting, I focus on learning episodes highlighted by critical incidents - moments that revealed to me key learnings - to explain my transformational learning and development. Highlighting these critical incidents aids in the critical analysis of each learning episode, and helps clarify how the learning informed practice. I apply the guidelines presented by action research to not only clarify in my mind the evolving construction of my mentor identity, but also illustrate how my participation in mentoring relationships contributed to my personal and professional development.

## **Findings and Discussions**

Mentoring generated in me a sense of self as I learned and developed within my mentoring relationships. The findings highlight challenges in the demands for my time, desire to recognise my mentoring style, and the impact of role modelling as significant issues that converge to enhance my transformative learning and contribute to the formulation of my mentor identity. As we embarked on our mentoring journeys, I went into the relationships with a can-do attitude. I was apprehensive of what the relationship would bring, but quite confident of achieving ultimate success. I was an experienced professional educator holding a leadership academic position and willing to share my expertise and insights with my mentees. In hindsight, it is perhaps this overconfidence assumed by experienced professionals that may provide hurdles for improving mentor competency. I experienced learning episodes which triggered an ‘aha’ moment in me, a sudden realisation about a change in perspective. These were transformative learning occurrences that evidenced who I was as a mentor – my mentor identity. On these occasions, I had to pause, and critically reflect-on-action (Schön 1983), to evaluate the meaning and my learning from these episodes. I present and discuss these findings below.

### **Transformative learning episode 1: Do I really want to do this?**

*M dropped by my office to say hello. I was busy...in the middle of doing something, and I thought it was not an appropriate time for her to come see me. I felt disturbed and wondered whether this would be the norm. I wondered whether I had the time to give to this mentoring outside of what I had already scheduled...*

An impromptu visit from one of my mentees to my office, quite early in the mentoring relationship triggered an ‘aha’ transformative learning episode in me. The incident made me

wonder about the extent of my willingness to embrace mentoring practice. When my mentee started to seek me out, by dropping in at my office without an appointment, I felt uncomfortable and reluctant to spend more time with her. We had a formal schedule of meeting times, and I had not anticipated spending time outside of the set schedule. Although I did not turn her away, I was brief and to the point so that I could get back to the task on my desk. On reflection, I realised I identified more strongly as an educator than a mentor. I wondered what this said about my mentor identity and whether I espoused the values of a good mentor.

Mentors have different motives, which have potential to influence their interactions with the mentee and consequently the learning that emanates for the practice. As adult learners, we become motivated to pursue learning experiences when we can articulate the reasons for doing it (Daloz 2012). The meanings that emanate from such endeavours need to make sense to us relative to the particular social-cultural point in our lives. Consequently, the mentor needs to see the value that may emanate from the relationship to be willing to take up the task. Educators have reported enhanced research outputs, greater networking and enhanced professional recognition as outcomes of mentoring (Johnson 2002). Evidence suggests that motives to mentor others include self-enhancement, the desire to benefit others, and intrinsic satisfaction (Allen 2003; Allen et al. 1997; Janssen, van Vuuren, and de Jong 2014). There are mentors who desire a sense of generativity and want to leave a legacy by sharing knowledge and experiences so that it may be passed along to others (Allen et al. 1997). Others participate in mentoring for personal and professional development (Allen et al. 1997; Kram 1988). Clarity around why one would want to mentor another enhances willingness to embrace demands required for effective mentorship.

The demands of mentoring began to be clarified in practice and challenged my motives for wanting to be a mentor. I soon realised that mentoring would take time and effort that I would have to provide. The realisation that I had to give more of myself was scary at first. I had not realised that mentoring would require me to go beyond the surface to deeper places and spaces. These thoughts surprised me given my initial enthusiasm to mentor others. Critical self-reflections revealed the contradictions in my initial approach. I wanted to be a good mentor, yet was reluctant to pay the relationship the time and effort it needed to grow. The original confidence I had stepped with into the role quickly disintegrated. I wrestled with my self-perceived level of competence in my role, and had self-doubt of my ability to provide desired outcomes to mentees. I realised I would have to change my view of mentoring and allow myself to entertain new perspectives, the possibility of doing things differently. This was a moment that I realised I was searching for my mentoring self, not sure who I was as a mentor. My personal learning came from reflecting upon and dealing with these contradictions.

*I had not realised the kind of demands this relationship would require of me. I remembered that the weekend before, M had dropped in at my house just for a chat, which she had not done before.... Also she had dropped in at the office just to say hi again...all new ...It looks like now the demands on me in this relationship will increase. I have to be ready to be a friend as well...*

Just as I was struggling with my mentor identity, I realised the mentees were going through similar emotions, uncertain of what to do or how to do it, and looking to me for guidance and affirmation of good practice. The role of taking the lead in creating a safe and enabling environment where each mentoring partnership could flourish (Daloz 2012) dawned on me. I

realised the impact cultivating trust and friendship would have on our relationships. It was my responsibility to build a conducive learning environment as early as possible, deal with any curve balls thrown my way, and ensure I provided unique support and guidance to each of my mentees. My personal growth emanated from accepting that my role was to be available to the mentees for both their personal and professional developmental needs. I recorded my reflections like this:

*I realised today, that she was probably more comfortable in her role as a mentee, than I was in my role as a mentor. This realisation makes me want to sit down and think about this role, the expectations that the mentees have... I need to be ready for them at any time when I am needed. I also want from this experience, to be ready to act as a mentor at a moment's notice. I am wearing the shoes of a mentor... that is how M views me...*

This learning incident clarified to me the discrepancy between theory and practice. I had planned a complex mentoring program with a sound theoretical base (Nyanjom 2018), yet I was beginning to realise that practice was different. Translating references from the notion of theory into our practical world is often problematic. The tensions presented by this disconnect has resulted in significant research exploring how the gap between theory and practice can be bridged. For example, Wong (2011) explores mentoring policy and concludes that a solution on the theory-practice gap could be the involvement of stakeholders in a collaborative process of knowledge creation and implementation. Admiraal et al (2017) suggest the path to reducing the theory-practice gap is to research one's own practice and incorporating insights gained to one's professional skills. Critical reflection practices such as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action can assist professionals create strong links between espoused ideals and practice, and help turn abstract theories into experiences that can be applied into practice

(Schön 1983). Applying critical reflections on my experiences assisted in making sense of the unique challenges I was experiencing. The contradictions in ideas, beliefs and feelings that jostled for attention in actual practice contributed to my learning and my shifting mentor identity. Once I accepted the direction of our relationships, I found that our mentoring conversations became richer and the mentees more confident of what they would achieve from mentoring. I reflect in my journal about a conversation I carried out with W when he came to talk to me about issues of concern to him:

*I liked this conversation very much. The major reason why I liked it was because it was spontaneous, unplanned. This made me be aware that W was seeing me more and more as his mentor, somebody he can turn on at any time, somebody he believes has time for him, and is always willing to talk to him...This conversation clarified for me my role as a mentor, my duty of being on call, being responsive to the needs of my mentees. The conversation brought home to me the responsibility of being a mentor.*

From a learning perspective, being motivated and aware of one's motive in wishing to be a good mentor increases the chances of effective personal learning outcomes. Mentoring is a life role that adds purpose and meaning to a professional career (Daloz 2012). The motives to mentor others suggest becoming a mentor is akin to a calling (Dik and Duffy 2009) – a desire to approach a professional role purposefully, make a difference, leave a beneficial contribution, and gain a sense of satisfaction from the experience. I felt I was experiencing this calling in practice. I had a desire to mentor another, and with this intense longing, I wanted to be good at it. A sense of clarity of purpose and personal mission began to emerge in me. Critical reflections into why I wanted to be a mentor helped me reframe my perspectives. I sought to make mentoring a meaningful and fulfilling part of my work as an

educator. This meant putting in the required energy, time and passion into the practice, and closely aligning this practice with my developing mentor identity and sense of self.

### **Transformative learning episode 2: Do I have a mentoring style?**

*During my conversation with M, I was impatient at what I saw as her shortcoming. I was forthright and directive...I am beginning to wonder whether these are indications that I am too autocratic, and do not give people a chance to work out their ideas...or that I want them to think like me, or do it the way I want it to be done...*

The quote above triggered another learning episode, leading me towards a path of investigating my mentoring style. My reflections revealed feelings of discomfort in coming across as 'too directive'. The episode made me wonder what my mentoring style was and if this style depicted me as a good mentor. Investigating my mentoring style necessitated that I think about the image I held of myself as a mentor. Mentoring style refers to the forms of behaviour or strategies that mentors employ. I viewed my mentoring style as the observable behaviour that my mentees would see, and through which my mentor identity would be visible. Essentially, mentors are guides (Daloz 2012). Effective mentors need a style that balances the level of engagement in the relationship, being approachable and available, yet providing the mentee with adequate autonomy to explore their learning and learn from their experiences. This balancing act focusses on the learning and development of the mentee, and provides a safety net for the mentee's learning experiences.

As a senior educator, I had the technical pedagogic knowledge and skills that the educators in my educational institution could benefit from, and I had good interpersonal skills acquired from teaching and running a department in an educational institution. I also had the desire to

share my knowledge and experience with other educators. These qualities suggested I could make a good mentor. But I realised that for me, these qualities were inadequate. There was tension between my role as an administrator and as a mentor. An administrator has a role that involves quick reactions, decision-making and problem solving and this tends to make the administrator more directive. Mentoring on the other hand, is a shared role that requires delicate and caring interventions and feedback (Daloz 2012). It is a supportive role carried out in a quiet and comfortable place, rather than the administrator's often crisis centred and chaotic office. To be successful in my role as a mentor, I had to critically reflect upon my mentoring role and my administrative role and find a way to harmonise them.

My mentoring style became most clear to me through my coaching episodes with my mentees. Coaching is an integral part of mentoring (Clutterbuck 2004). Through coaching, the mentor takes the opportunity to challenge the mentee's assumptions, be a critical friend, and demonstrate difficult or complicated tasks. Clutterbuck (2004) further suggests that mentees need to be encouraged to be proactive in searching for their own solutions with support and guidance from the mentor. Encouragement from the mentor gives the mentees confidence that they can achieve their planned objectives. Through encouragement, the mentor seeks to consolidate in the mentee a sense of confidence and intent to learn. Rather than being 'forthright and directive', the style I desired was to instil autonomy in learning through encouragement. To achieve this, I had to juggle my professional and personal priorities and focus on my mentees' learning needs. Therefore, I worked to push back the boundaries I had previously set, actively seeking opportunities to be helpful, and making sure the mentees understood that I was available for them.

Findings indicate that my style changed as the mentoring relationship developed. Whilst earlier in the relationship, I would be more directive as to what I thought required to be done, progressively I encouraged the mentees to own their learning. I had to find a way to change without distancing myself from the situation. I had to assess that each mentee was still with me, and not feeling abandoned. This was assisted by intermittent clarification of goals and expectations and affirmation that mentees' learning needs were being met. I express this style in the following statement:

*When we talk, I do not give her step-by-step procedure of how to perform the task. We talk it out, and through discussion suggestions flow on how to do things. She goes and tries it out, and she comes back with feedback of how the task went and how much of an understanding she now has of it...*

My mentoring style was also about how heterogeneously I approached the mentoring of two mentees. Each mentoring experience is unique, dependant on the context within which they occur (Cohen 1995; Daloz 2012; Langdon 2014). Rather than applying a cookie cutter approach, I had the awareness that each of my mentees had unique needs. Consequently, my role was to adjust my approaches to meet the different expectations of each mentee. I had to take into consideration each context I found myself in relation to each individual mentee. M provides her feedback on this issue:

*[The mentor] is able to analytically look at the both of us and see us as different individuals who have different personal goals to meet, even the way we just handle different situations or conflict within our working areas, I'm sure she is able to analyse and critically think that these two individuals, that both mentees are quite different and I think that's been a great benefit for her.*

The mentees relied less on me to provide answers and began to voluntarily offer solutions to specific issues and use me as a sounding board. This indicated to me that my goal to make the mentees more self-sufficient as learners was working. W comments on this issue:

*I thought it would be more of the mentor driven type of relationship, and to me I was looking for her to do a lot of things you know, like call me, tell me what to do...Then I realised it's me to say what it is that I want from the relationship. So I think it is really a dynamic experience, you find that it changes with time and I think that what is most important is how finally it changes you and how you see yourself developing and what you see yourself gaining from it...*

Mentoring other educators gave me a sense of satisfaction and genuine fulfilment, increasing my confidence and self-esteem. It also re-energized my interest in teaching as we worked together with the mentees on different projects to enhance their pedagogic skills. When our relationships matured, it seemed to me that I watched from the sidelines as the mentees took charge of what they wanted to achieve from the relationship. I was not only improving my mentoring practice, but gaining confidence in my ability to progressively recognise and evolve my mentor identity.

### **Transformative learning episode 3: I'm being watched...all the time**

*I start the appraisal by putting him at ease, talking of general things before we start on what he has written in the documents earlier forwarded to me. This is a technique I have seen my mentor use... [Quote from W's reflective journal]*

The third transformative learning episode, and 'aha' moment, was when I realised the impact of the role modelling function to my mentoring practice. When I read and reflected upon my

mentees' acknowledgement of my positive influence (such as the quote above), the significance of being a positive role model dawned on me. I suddenly realised the powerful potential role modelling could have on my mentees' learning and development.

Role modelling is a fundamental function of mentoring. Studies suggest that learning through observation is one of the main mentoring functions through which personal learning takes place in a mentoring relationship (Kram 1988). It should not have been surprising to me that role modelling emerged from the data as contributing to improving my mentoring practice. But at the beginning I was not consciously aware of the impact or influence of my values and behaviour on the mentees. Role modelling is like a hidden camera, with mentors often not conscious of what behaviours are being emulated by mentees. Whilst at the beginning of the mentoring process role modelling was an unconscious activity to me, after this realisation, it raised to the surface and became more conscious. The realisation that my actions matter suddenly fuelled my prosocial intentions. I became concerned about the values and beliefs I espouse and whether I was exhibiting these to the mentees. I reflected in my journal:

*My values pass on to them through my mentoring sessions, and I can lead by example.*

*The mentees hear about as well as see what it is that I do, and how I do it. Sometimes*

*I think consciously about what is the right thing to do...*

The impact of the role modelling function took our learning beyond our programmed structures and impacted both administrative and teaching practices. I became conscious that as I went about my everyday activities, the mentees were watching and emulating certain aspects of my behaviours. And they were implementing their learning into their working practices. The personal learnings from the mentoring process was diffusing beyond our mentoring circle,

resulting in shared knowledge not only being experienced at individual level, but at interpersonal and organisational level as well. W's states:

*I am beginning to get very good ideas on how to handle [conflict] situations...some of these ideas is from what [my mentor] is doing and watching her dealing with situations which are similar...*

Through critical self-reflections, and direct and indirect feedback from my mentees, I gained insight into my assumptions, and developed greater awareness of how my actions were interpreted by the mentees. My awareness of being a role model led me to listen more keenly and ask more probing questions. Our mentoring conversations introduced different perspectives, and I become more self-confident of my mentoring abilities. Our interactions provided external affirmation of and strengthened my evolving mentor identity. I realised that mentoring practice needed to be part of the way I do things. The boundaries between my personal and professional life began to blur. Similar to the stories of women mentors shared by Mysyk (2008), mentoring in my experience was becoming inseparable from how I lived my life in general, because I was a mentor both on and off stage. My perspective about mentoring defined the kind of mentor I was and informed my mentor identity.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, I use self-study action research methodology to explore the interplay between personal and professional learning and mentor identity construction. Specifically, applying Whitehead's (1989) living theory approach to action research enabled me to integrate theory, research and practice, and to generate my own personal theory in collaboration with others. The inquiry accorded me an opportunity to achieve my objective of improving my mentoring

practice and at the same time, contribute to the understanding of how mentors can improve their mentoring practice by investigating their mentor identity. Evidence is drawn from my lived experience of transformational learning while experiencing mentoring relationships, through the narration of three transformative learning episodes presented as critical incidents.

This study highlights three significant issues. First, mentors that have a strategic intent to learn while mentoring another enhance potential for personal and professional learning and development. In today's turbulent and challenging academic environments, it is no longer adequate to assume the mentor's competency. Being an effective professional is beneficial for but not synonymous with being an effective mentor. In addition, the learning of the mentor within the mentoring process is generally involuntary and unplanned. A strategic intent to learn through deliberate practice (Ericsson et al. 1993) can have mentors purposefully identifying areas of mentoring competencies that require improvement, finding opportunity to practice these skills within mentoring practice, and in this way stretching their mentoring competencies to acquire improved learning and development. Taking strategic advantage of mentoring opportunities, and engaging in purposeful and repetitive practice can propel mentors to the next level of mentoring expertise. Mentoring provides opportunity for meaningful learning to take place within authentic social spheres, thus providing learning environments that encourage purposeful and personally significant experiences. A strategic intent by the mentor to learn within the relationship could be beneficial to the mentor's development, as well as be an intrinsic reward that may enhance the mentor's commitment to mentoring practice. In practice, mentors with a strategic intent to improve from a personal perspective would be more willing to mentor others, providing a pool of potential mentors ready and willing to improve their mentoring competencies. To encourage a mentoring culture at all levels of the institution, it is important to provide clarity on the self-development

benefits that can accrue from mentoring. Our mentoring project had the added benefit of contributing to the organisation's learning and growth. Our mentoring activities created awareness about mentoring, and saw an increased interest in mentoring as a viable professional development intervention. These benefits accrued beyond our six-month project, and provided further evidence of the strength of action research to permeate beyond single institutional projects into the wider organisational environment. As the need and use of mentoring continues in higher education, so does the need for mentors to focus on personal and professional growth specific to mentoring practice.

Second, mentoring relationships may offer the most appropriate training grounds for mentors to investigate their mentor identity and improve their mentoring competencies. The case for mentor development while experiencing a mentoring relationship has been clarified and supported. In this study I emphasise that mentoring is a flexible intervention that can be utilised for the benefit of the mentor's personal and professional development.

Mentoring is a reciprocal relationship where mutual learning between mentees and mentors is an integral part of the journey (Healy and Welchert 1990; Lopez-Real and Kwan 2005), and provides developmental opportunities to all participants within a co-learning and collaborative space. The recognition that the mentoring relationship resides in a co-learning space is therefore critical to the success of mentor development (van Ginkel, Verloop, and Denessen 2016). This partnership enables a safe and supportive environment for deliberate practice. The current study has demonstrated that a relationship created similar to ours – an informal mentoring relationship with stipulated learning outcomes, without the complications of excessive documentation and bureaucratic interventions – provides the mentor with necessary empowerment to achieve personal learning goals driven by critical reflective practice.

Mentoring relationships are not homogenous, but unique to specific contexts (Cohen 1995; Daloz 2012; Langdon 2014). This quality makes it challenging to design ideal mentor development programs that can develop competent mentors who recognise and embrace their mentor identity. Given the different contexts where this social practice can occur, it is imperative that mentors specifically take charge of their own personal and professional development that will culminate in positive mentoring outcomes. While in a mentoring relationship, the mentor has opportunity to engage in emancipatory critical self-reflections (Mezirow 1981; Lopez-Real and Kwan, 2005) that can lead to self-discovery and the construction of mentor identity. The mentoring relationship allows for the interface between learning and practice, supporting transformational changes to take place in the participating individuals.

Third, the paper offers an opportunity for shared discourse, as the account of improving my mentoring practice and strengthening my mentor identity through critical self-reflections may encourage and support mentors in examining their practice. Although my findings are personal and grounded in the context in which they occurred, there is value in sharing my story. The study shows a glimpse into how mentor identity can be shaped in real time. Sharing my lived experience may act as a catalyst to other mentors to investigate their mentoring practices and inspire them to wonder about their mentor identity. From this perspective, this paper has potential for generalisation in other settings. Being mindful however, that mentoring practices tend to be organisational and context specific, I share my experiences with the hope that the issues I raise here can be considered by others as a means of initiating an improvement to their mentoring practice within their specific contexts. Self-study action research proved a valuable tool by which to uncover the tensions and dimensions inherent in the contextual social environment within which mentoring practice occurs. The

private nature of mentoring relationships make a self-study action research an appropriate avenue through which to illuminate insights about this phenomenon. Mentors with a lived experience of mentor learning and development can contribute significantly to uncovering how mentor-mentee interactions contribute to mentor development, and mentor identity formation, making this an area in mentoring literature that could benefit from further research. Mentoring literature could also benefit from further exploration of what impacts the awareness of mentor identity can have on participating individuals and their organisations. It is important for higher education institutions to harness the transformational learning impacts that can diffuse through and benefit the organisation at personal, interpersonal and institutional levels.

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