

Expanding Our Horizons: Mentoring as a Tool for Personal and Career Development

Report on a workshop held at the 19th Annual Conference
of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library
Association 3 July 2004, Brisbane, Queensland

by Gillian Hallam & Chris Gissing

"Mentoring is a supportive learning relationship between a caring individual who shares his/her knowledge, professional experience and insights with another individual who is ready and willing to benefit from this exchange to develop his or her skills, confidence and abilities to enrich his or her professional journey."

(Faure, 2000, p.3)

On Saturday, 3 July, the morning session of the conference was dedicated to a workshop on career mentoring. Gillian Hallam, Senior Lecturer in the LIS course at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and Chris Gissing, Hub Team Leader with the Chermiside Library of Brisbane City Council, were invited to facilitate the workshop. Gillian and Chris coordinate the QUT / ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program and are active members of the ALIA Quorum Professional Mentoring Committee.

Within the context of the conference, they aimed to explore the value of mentoring as a way to expand one's own horizons, as an ongoing career development activity that can benefit the individual both professionally and personally. The main goals of the workshop were therefore to help participants develop their understanding of the concept of mentoring relationships, to consider both the benefits and challenges to those involved in mentoring. Gillian and Chris had received a research grant to explore these issues within the student mentoring program, so the workshop provided an opportunity to discuss the findings from the research. The findings highlighted the overall benefits to all participants in terms of positive outcomes in their general learning, their ongoing professional development

and personal development. A review of this research project was published in the *Australian Library Journal* in May 2003.

Very briefly, mentoring was shown to help mentees who were embarking on their new careers in the following areas:

Career related benefits

- Job application skills
- Confidence in working in the library and information science profession
- Benefits of strong professional networks
- Awareness of career opportunities
- Development of a career plan
- Awareness of the role of the professional association
- Getting a job!

Learning related benefits

- Professional role model
- Learning from others' experiences
- Gaining specific LIS skills and knowledge
- Establishing a practice of self-directed learning
- Identification of own training needs
- Reduced feelings of professional isolation

Personal development benefits

- Personal and interpersonal skills, generic capabilities
- Communication, Teamwork, Leadership, Self-management, Critical thinking
- Insights into the behaviour of others
- Challenging what they might become
- Self assurance in the face of new situations
- Motivation to succeed in an LIS career
- New friendships

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While mentoring is seen to be generally beneficial for the mentees, mentors also can gain a great deal from the relationship:

Career related benefits

- Recognition of own LIS skills and experience
- Increased job satisfaction
- Challenging existing mental models
- Awareness of issues central to LIS education
- Better understanding of the skills of new graduates
- Further development of own LIS skills

Learning related benefits

- Learning from others' experiences
- Development of skills in reflective practice
- Commitment to lifelong learning
- Reduced feelings of professional isolation

Personal development benefits

- Personal satisfaction in another's development
- Insights into the behaviour of others
- Increased sense of self-worth
- Self-insight
- New friendships
- Oral communication

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It should be noted that the research was undertaken with a 'transitional' mentoring program, i.e. one where the mentee is entering a new career. Nevertheless, most of us would agree that our careers are constantly in a state of transition, given the dynamic nature of the

library and information profession, so that similar benefits may potentially be attained at any stage of our working life.

While this discussion provided insights into mentoring in general, the main focus of the workshop was to explore the practical dimensions of mentoring, so that participants could take away some useful ideas that would help them make the most of their future roles of mentor or mentee. The workshop was therefore conducted to ensure that everyone felt comfortable about sharing their ideas and concerns about mentoring relationships. The group collaboratively brainstormed their general goals and expectations of mentoring relationships, and then spent time thinking about the main problems they thought they may encounter – such as time, trust, honesty, confidentiality, mutual philosophies, relative isolation (especially for ANZTLA librarians) – a lot of issues that are actually common to human relationships in general. There was then an opportunity to consider strategies that would help manage or resolve the problems that had been listed.



One of the most important initial steps in establishing a mentoring relationship is to work together to openly discuss each others' goals and expectations. While some authors recommend developing a 'mentoring contract', the idea of coming to agreement on key aspects of the individual relationship is very valuable. Participants were provided with a workbook or guide they could take away, with ideas to stimulate discussion between mentor and mentee, and to help the mentee consider their personal and professional expectations:

Needs

What do you need from a mentor and a mentoring relationship?

Interests

What are your main areas of professional interest?

Concerns

What are the main issues that concern you?

Expectations

What do you expect from your job or your career?

What do you expect a mentor to do for you?

The workshop also introduced participants to the concept of reflective practice, as a tool to deepen and strengthen the learning experience, particularly when a person encounters fresh professional situations where new knowledge and skills are developed. Reflective practice enables both mentees and mentors to monitor and record their new learning experiences, together with their emotional responses to these experiences. They are able to become more critically aware of the actual learning processes as they take place, and of the increased levels of skills and knowledge that they have acquired.

The workbook also offered some introductory strategies to help participants commence the reflective process.

Gillian and Chris encouraged participants to go back to their workplaces with some clear goals to establish their own mentoring relationship. A useful supporting tool written for those interested in mentoring in the Australian library and information profession is *My mentoring diary*, by Ann Ritchie and Paul Genoni. In addition, ALIA is currently establishing a national mentoring group to help coordinate professional mentoring activities across Australia, to support mentors and mentees wherever they may live, however isolated they may feel. For further details about this initiative, please contact Gillian.

Dr Gillian Hallam
Senior Lecturer
School of Information Systems
Faculty of Information Technology
Queensland University of Technology

Tel: (07) 3864 2177
Email: g.hallam@qut.edu.au

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