Mentoring in the Graduate Certificate: Safety in numbers?

Christine Asmar (with Vicki Bradford, Paul Ihashiguchi and Leah Lui-Chivische)

In early 2007, three Indigenous staff enrolled for our 2007 Graduate Certificate: Vicki Bradford (Nursing & Midwifery); Paul Ihashiguchi (Rural Health - Northern Rivers); and Leah Lui-Chivische (Koori Centre). In planning for the mentoring which is routinely part of the ITL course, I recollected an earlier comment, from a Koori colleague of mine, that western-style one-to-one mentoring was not always appropriate for Indigenous individuals. I therefore proposed to my colleagues that we try some group mentoring, with the extra option of individual email or telephone contact, if needed. Given that I would have three mentees, time efficiency was also a factor, for me. Fortunately, they all said Yes! In Semester 2 of the course the mentoring arrangement changed: they were allocated ‘critical friends’ in other disciplines. In October I asked them to reflect on the whole mentoring experience, and here are some of their reflections.

Overall, Vicki saw the mentoring as a ‘supportive mechanism’, and Leah similarly referred to how the support ‘helped me cope with the workload’. Paul focused more on the mentor’s role as a facilitator: ‘You didn’t give me the answers but helped me access them’.

Although all three agreed that mentors from disciplines different to one’s own were beneficial, it was for a variety of reasons: Paul said: ‘It brings some fresh energy… Someone from the same discipline [is] more focused on what they think I should learn.’ Vicki, on the other hand, was initially unsure about not knowing who her mentor would be in semester 2, and not having any input into that: ‘That’s what happened to Aboriginal people for years - having things forced upon you’. However she could have become ‘less self-reliant, compliant, if it had been someone I was more familiar with’, hence, she learnt to value the relationship with Faculty colleagues.

Looking back on the whole experience, Leah acknowledged the ‘cultural safety net’ provided by the Indigenous grouping, but saw her professional development as ultimately better served by working beyond it, with senior academics in disciplines other than her own. Paul, on the other hand, was adamant: ‘Indigenous academics should always be offered group mentoring’. For him personally: ‘I love the idea of being mentored - it keeps me on track, keeps me motivated’. For Vicki the full benefit of mentoring - both with her peer group and later, within her Faculty - came with regular meetings: ‘I’m fairly new to the University so I am still open to change’.

Christine reflects:

In an ideal mentoring situation there is mutual learning, and I was the beneficiary of new insights thanks to Paul, Vicki and Leah. Thus, while it seems clear that group mentoring should be an option available to Indigenous staff, it also appears that having access to other options - if not initially, then later on - will support Indigenous staff in further developing, professionally. Issues such as perceived lack of consultation, and the need for building trust, seem to persist in academia (and beyond), but ‘sharing our Aboriginality’ with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues emerged as a source of strength, and of new learning.

Selected ITL Staff Highlights

Teaching and learning research continues to be a focus of ITL’s work. The highlights below indicate selected achievements in 2007.

Professional recognition

Angela Brew was elected to be a Fellow of the Society for Research into Higher Education, UK.

Keith Trigwell became Co-President of International Society for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Tui Peseta was promoted to Lecturer. She was also invited to the role of Associate Editor for the International Journal of Academic Development.

Simon Barrie was promoted to Associate Professor.

Christine Asmar was invited to Chair the Plenary Panel on Indigenous Perspectives on Knowledge and Epistemologies at the 2007 Conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Research grants

Barrie S.C., Hughes C. & Smith C. (2007). Embedding Graduate Attributes in Curricula and Assessment (Funded by the Carrick Institute $210,000)

Barrie S.C. (2007). The use of student feedback surveys for teaching quality assurance in Australia. (Funded by DEST & the Carrick Institute $80,000)


Refereed Publications


Keynote presentations


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www.itl.usyd.edu.au/programs/gradcert/