

https://dspace.org/

# Mentoring as a tool for academic and personal development in the Mellon Mays undergraduate program.

**Mabeta, Matsie Rebecca**

**2012-01-09**
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/10928

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

# CHAPTER 6: REFLECTION, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter is preceded by the research results in the previous chapters, being the fourth and the fifth chapters. The fourth chapter is an account of the results of interviews with mentors and the fifth chapter, the result of interviews with mentees. This chapter will be looking at the discussion, reflections and the conclusion of my research. The results will be addressed in relation to the three research questions on mentoring relationships at Wits University. I will first give an overview of the research, followed by the discussion, then the reflection and suggestions for further research will follow.

## 6.2 Overview

The MMUF was formed in the U.S.A. by the Andrew Mellon Foundation with the aim of eradicating under-representation of minority groups at institutions of higher learning. The aim was to increase the number of individuals in minority groups who become academics.

The MMUF was established at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2008, but no investigation has been conducted into the success or failure of the mentoring programme. This research was undertaken to explore mentoring as a tool for academic and personal development. It will seek to answer the following questions:

1. Why is mentoring considered a powerful tool for academic and personal development?
2. What difficulties are reported by students and their mentors in the student-mentor relationship?
3. How do students and their mentors benefit from mentoring?

In chapter two, I reviewed literature on the mentor and mentoring relationship in the workplace and in academia. A mentor is said to be someone who is older and more experienced, and his/her duty is to guide, coach and protect an inexperienced younger person (Shea: 1992, p. 31).

In chapter three, I proposed to use three methods to conduct my study: semi-structured interviews, document analysis and informal conversations. Using three methods and five

mentor-student pairs in my study allowed me to triangulate the data and increase the validity of the research results. In 2008 four of the five selected students came from Humanities. They were female students, and the one male from the Science Faculty. The same was for their mentors; they were from Humanities and Science. Three of the mentors were female and the other two were male. The male student in the Science Faculty was mentored by a male mentor. Three female students were matched with female mentors and one relationship was between a female student and a male mentor.

These research results were presented in chapters four and five in the form of profiles of mentors (chapter 4) and mentees (chapter 5). All three female relationships were a success. Both mentors and mentees were confident that they had a healthy relationship. The male mentor and male student relationship did not work well for two reasons. The first reason was that both the mentor and the mentee did not schedule time to meet. The student was busy in the SRC (Student Representative Council)[1] and with his studies and the mentor was on sabbatical, busy with research and publication. The mentor was not available in person and on email. The second reason was that the mentor and the student were from two different academic departments. The mentee felt that this was the major reason that their relationship failed.

The second relationship that failed was between a male mentor and female student. The relationship started smoothly, but they did not set ground rules, and soon the boundaries of a mentoring relationship were exceeded.

The mentor had a superior position in the department and faculty, and was an expert in his field. This might have intimidated the mentee. The student demanded more time and attention than the mentor could give. It was an awkward relationship. Both mentor and mentee had to decide how to behave towards each other. The first signs that the relationship was beginning to fail was when the student could not see that her mentor's criticism was constructive and took it as a personal attack. The student did not recognize and respect the mentor's time. She began to have a sense of entitlement. The assistance and time the mentor gave her were not appreciated. When the mentor asked to meet outside office hours because he was busy, yet still wanted find time for the student, the student was reluctant to come at those times. Because of the arrogant behavior that the student was displaying, the mentor instructed the

[1] SRC ( Student Representative Council)

student to get another mentor. Shea (1992) stated that problems in mentoring relationships may be related to gossip, envy, suspicion, speculation, false assumption. He stated that attitudes have lessened the effectiveness of cross-gender mentoring in some environments.

Thus it appears that mentoring is a potentially useful tool for students' personal and academic development. In three of the five relationships, mentors and mentees agreed about the benefits.

## 6.3 Discussion of the Research Results

### 6.3.1 Is Mentoring a Useful Tool in Personal and Academic Development?

In the first mentor–student pair, Jeannete said she was able to offer pastoral care, and was interested in academic development and in supporting students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. After their interactions, her student, Tshepo reflected on her writing and tutoring. According to Owen (1991), mentoring is a

> …deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed upon goal of having a lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies (p. 14).

In support of Owen, Jeanette said in the interview,

> I think that [mentoring] had an effect because there are certain things I have said to her constantly like stop writing like you speak because swapping speech from spoken to written is problematic. She can now identify when she is doing that and she laughs because she knows that I am not going to like it, so she is now reflecting on her writing.

The second mentor, Prishani, also said that when a student approached her asking her to be her mentor, she was excited because mentoring was exactly what she had always wanted to do for young girls. She said, 'There was no way one could grow intellectually and not personally.' Daloz (1986) supports this in his statement that, 'mentors are more concerned with promoting the development of the student than teachers and lecturers (p. 20).'

Sani, too, said that she was happy with her student's improvement and that Kholeka was confident that she could 'go out there and face the academic world.' Prishani said their interactions were more driven by their research interest than personal issues and the student, Memsa, become more focused and committed. This was echoed by two other mentors who said that in their relationships they were fostering and deepening students' specialist knowledge. Casto et al. (2005) agrees:

> Mentoring is an integral tool for students' success. Success is often achieved because a student received support and guidance from a mentor (p, 331).

Lee (2007) states that: 'the mentor provides profound experience and provides acceptance and confirmation that the mentee is worthwhile and this leads to personal empowerment' (p. 686).

Tshepo, Jeanette's mentee, echoed what Jeanette had said. 'Through Jeanette's guidance I am able to make decisions for myself.' She mentioned that, before meeting Jeanette, she did not eat vegetables but during their relationship, Jeanette made it her business that Tshepo ate her vegetables.

Through mentoring, students became confident to stand on their own two feet and make their own decisions. The mentors and mentees believed that was indicative of personal development and that mentees could make their mark; mentors felt that students had grown academically. Memsa said she used to feel intimidated and felt like she was not 'smart', but in the mentoring relationship with Prishani, she became more confident of putting a point across. She felt that she had potential and that she was intelligent. Kholeka also made a point that her confidence improved after meeting her mentor, Sani Roberts.

In the two failed relationships, the mentees were not sure of themselves, and were just relieved that they got out of unfortunate relationships. In Peter's case, he left the programme and could not say anything good about the relationship, and Seisa stayed on with Thoko as a new mentor.

### 6.3.2 What Difficulties are Reported by Students and their Mentors in the Student-Mentor Relationship?

One student mentioned that a difficulty arose when they were both under pressure in their different worlds and they became hostile towards each other. The mentor, Jeanette, confirmed that as well. She mentioned that she had a problem with her PhD, and when Tshepo insisted she could help, Jeanette just snapped because there was nothing that Tshepo could do. Only Jeanette could solve the problem she had then. Shea (1992) argues that:

> Mentoring relationships have their downfalls and success stories. It is important for both parties to set ground rules for the relationship to be successful. Together they should articulate their expectations of each other. They both must respect each other's space and time (p. 17).

Another difficulty mentioned by several mentees was that it was frustrating when the mentor could not keep an appointment. Mentors were often in superior positions in their departments and might be called to attend a meeting or to a crisis at the last minute. This is confirmed by Ehnrich (2004) in his findings about mentoring relationships. One of the reasons for a relationship failure is when the mentor or mentee are out of touch. This may be the case when either the mentor or the mentee lacks time for consultation (p. 520).

In Kholeka's case, Sani was on sabbatical leave but could respond to telephone calls and email. It was frustrating for Kholeka that Sani was not there physically when Kholeka needed her to solve a problem immediately.

Unlike Sani, Peter's mentor, Ebrahim, was on sabbatical leave and never responded to Peter's emails and phone calls. Peter was constantly frustrated and there was nothing the MMUF coordinators could do because it was not easy to find mentors in his department. Prospective mentors were either very busy or not interested. Ehnrich (2004) lists a few concerns which are relevant here:

- Lack of time for mentoring
- Poor planning of the mentoring process
- Unsuccessful matching of mentor and mentee
- Lack of understanding of the mentoring process
- Lack of access to mentors.

Seisa mentioned the problem of lack of time on the part of her mentor, Khoisan. She said she did not appreciate having to meet her mentor outside office hours as it was not safe to walk home afterwards. The university was deserted and scary after hours. Ehnrich (2004) stated that: 'under various conditions, the mentoring relationship can be detrimental to either the mentor or the mentee' (p. 520).

Their awkward relationship made Seisa's mentor feel that she was an 'extra burden.' Seisa was receiving financial assistance 'from all over the world', for food, accommodation and pocket money from her relatives, and this situation hindered her from focusing on her work.

Khoisan thought he would help her with money to ease her anxiety about how she was going to pay rent or what she was going to eat that evening. Khoisan started by recommending that Seisa participate in the feeding scheme that existed on campus. He also approved the purchase of a television for Seisa because she needed to analyse news and documentaries on xenophobia for her research. But Seisa developed a sense of entitlement. She expected her mentor to provide more than he could offer. Because Khoisan was trying to protect Seisa, he exceeded normal interpersonal boundaries. When he could not or would not provide any more money, goods and time, Seisa resented it and started being defiant. Casto et al. (2005) stated that:

> There may be challenges for male mentors of female mentees to overcome, including pervasive or unaddressed sexist attitudes toward women, gender politics and power relations. Socialized roles may interfere in cross-gender mentoring as female mentees may find themselves in an awkward position as both student and woman (p. 335).

Resentment came when the mentor was giving critical feedback to Seisa; she saw it as a personal attack. During the interview, Seisa said when she came up with the topic, her mentor did not find any problem with her topic but later, when the relationship was getting unhealthy, the mentor told her that it wasn't going to be easy for her to access the media house files given her financial status. She did not understand why he raised problems eight months later. She said Khoisan was 'sabotaging' her. But the same problem was confirmed by her new mentor. In trying to understand why Khoisan picked up this problem eight months later, Seisa said she thought that he was going to use his influence and contacts to access information for her but, because of their differences, he did not help. This kind of fundamental misunderstanding of roles was supported by Ehrich, Hanford & Tennent (2004) who says: 'under various conditions, the mentoring relationship can be detrimental to the mentor, mentee or both (p. 25), and Ehrich et al. (2004) who argued that 'under various conditions, the mentoring relationship can be detrimental to the mentor, mentee or both (p. 520).

### 6.3.3 How do Students and their Mentors benefit from Mentoring?

The students were grateful to their mentors, saying they were now able to interact critically with their reading. Seisa said that she used to procrastinate, but ever since she had a new

mentor, Sonto, things changed because her mentor taught her self-discipline. Sonto gave Seisa some enriching articles for her research, and increased her motivation.

Memsa said that: 'I can now articulate myself and I can speak with confidence and my writing has improved.'

Tshepo said that Jeanette transferred her passion [for] teaching to her. 'I feel this when I teach my tutorial group, I begin to sound like her; such that I would question myself: "Is it me or is it Jeanette talking here?"'

Kholeka thought the benefits were 'priceless', as her mentor introduced her to powerful theatre directors. One of them, John Kani, contributed to Kholeka's research. When her mentor told Kholeka that they are had an appointment with John Kani, she thought she was joking but when they drove to the Market Theatre and met him she was excited and thought she was dreaming. In her department, meeting Kani was every student's dream and most students envied Kholeka.

Mentees benefited more than mentors, After all, the idea is that the experienced ones mobilize resources and networks for the inexperienced ones. Prishani said 'I think I can confidently speak on behalf of other mentors.' The benefit they get as mentors and researchers are that mentees come 'with raw ideas that they as researchers never thought of exploring.' She told me that she had learned a lot about other people's cultures. Prishani told me a scenario of a very good student missing an important test and everybody in her department agreed that the student should fail. On realizing that the student had an ancestral calling where she was to be initiated to become a *sangoma*, Prishani said she was the only one who was sensitive and understood the student's plight. This was because in her interaction with students, she had learned with their help about different cultures and traditions. This was another benefit.

I think the benefits for mentors, were most apparent when the mentees gave their presentations in September 2010. Mentors felt satisfied that they had done justice to young and upcoming intellectuals. Another benefit could be that mentees gain respect for their mentors and start to talk about them, giving them recognition on campus and hence more students registering in particular courses and departments.

### 6.3.4 Reflection on the Research Design

As stated previously, the other source of data collection was informal conversations. In my conversations with some of the participants, I had more information than on the interviews, but most of that information I couldn't use because it became too personal and might have exposed individuals. The interview with Seisa was somehow not truthful; I am saying this because in an informal conversation she described more honestly her experience in relation to Khoisan. The two participants' stories were somehow not consistent and therefore cannot be relied on. This was the case with Peter and his mentor Ebrahim. Their stories were inconsistent.

### 6.3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms that mentoring was indeed a tool for personal and academic development in the MMUF. The study is in agreement with the literature that the benefits of mentoring are many and varied. All these were confirmed by the successful relationships.

The one relationship that failed completely, Peter and Ebrahim, showed that without a mentor, students are bound not to succeed. Casto et al. (2005) agree that mentoring is an integral tool for students' success. It is not always the best students who get through a difficult graduate programme.

Conversations with Jeanette, Prishani and Sani and their mentees were consistent; what came up in the interviews was also mentioned in the conversations. Jeanette was an ideal mentor and her relationship with Tshepo went beyond the academic. The reason I am saying this, is that they both came to know each other so well it was as if they'd known each other before 2008. Their relationship went on beyond the two years stipulated by the MMUF. Tshepo later suffered depression and Jeanette was always by her side.

### 6.3.6 Further Research

In this study of the five pairs of students and mentors that participated, the benefits were more visible for mentees and very few were discovered for mentors. I would suggest that the benefits for mentors be studied further. Also, the relationships across gender, socio-economic background should be looked at in more mentoring relationships. I felt that in the one cross-gender relationship that I studied, I did not get honest reasons for the failure of the relationship.