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Taking on a Life of Its Own: Relational Mentoring for Mutual Professional Growth

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Abstract

Relational mentoring, or critical friendships, has been recognized as an effective form of continuous professional development (PD). Through autonomous informal mentoring sessions implemented outside the umbrella of institutional top-down PD initiatives, teachers can gain valuable insights on their own practice and that of their peers. In this paper, one such mentoring session is analyzed from the perspective of both participants. Transcribed audio data of the mentoring session was inductively analyzed by both mentor and mentee, and major points of salience were reflectively and collaboratively discussed. The reflections highlighted the fluid nature of the session that challenged the traditional hierarchical mentor-mentee dynamic. While the session began in a transactional fashion with mentee seeking knowledge from mentor, it was seen to evolve into a more symmetrical relationship of co-learning. This short account of reflective practice offers additional evidence of the transformational potential of relational mentoring and critical friendships on teachers' PD. Moreover, there are indications that such autonomous PD can contribute positively to sustaining teacher wellbeing in times of uncertainty and instability.

Keywords: mentoring, professional development, Japanese university, professional community, dialogic reflection

Dialogic reflection and mentoring have been highlighted by many as a potentially valuable means of professional development and reflective practice (Farrell, 2018; Harrison et al., 2005; Kato, 2017; Mann & Walsh, 2017). Opposed to traditional or transactional mentoring relationships characterized by a distinct experienced/senior and neophyte/junior relationship, similar to the *jouge kankei* [seniority-based hierarchy] dynamic prevalent within Japan (Haghirian, 2010), relational or collaborative mentorship emphasizes the potential for bidirectional learning between mentor and mentee (Goosney et al., 2014; Ragins, 2012). In this report, Daniel, a full-time university lecturer, and Alex, a part-time adjunct lecturer at Daniel's current workplace, describe one mentoring session that they engaged in, the dynamics of their relationship, and how they were able to co-construct deep reflection and learning relating to their careers.

Daniel: I believe that mentoring represents a key pillar of the effective professional development that I have been engaged in for the majority of my career to date. Without the mentoring through critical friendships (Farrell, 2018) that I have been lucky enough to experience and the deep reflection that has been facilitated by these relationships, my life as a pracademic would be far lonelier and markedly less productive and stimulating. One key point to note here is that, just as in the case of relational mentoring (Ragins, 2012) or collaborative mentoring (Goosney et al., 2014) practices, the critical friendships that I have participated in (Gill & Hooper, 2020; Hooper & Snyder, 2017; Watkins & Hooper, in press) have been based on fundamentally even ground. These experiences as well as my teacher beliefs—grounded in a partnership, rather than domination power dynamic (Eisler, 2002)—meant that eschewing traditional hierarchical power during collaboration was highly desirable to me. It was with this mindset that I entered the mentoring session with Alex.

Alex: Earlier in my career, while teaching at language schools, and completing my MA TESOL and the Cambridge DELTA, I have been fortunate enough to have many influential mentors. These included senior teachers, teacher trainers, and graduate school professors. However, since beginning to teach at the university level in Japan in 2019, I have not had many opportunities to engage in mentoring. I believe mentoring to be an important aspect of professional development, as it allows productive communication and learning opportunities between experienced professionals. My desire to engage in mentoring was one of the main reasons for participating in this project. Another reason was to learn more about PhD-level research and the publication process from a more experienced colleague, as I have recently been considering starting a doctorate degree. Interestingly, after taking part in the interview and co-writing the article, my perspective on the concepts of mentoring and research was broadened, which was not my expectation going in.

What We Did

Daniel initially contacted Alex and asked whether he would be willing to participate in the mentoring session with him. Alex was an adjunct lecturer at a number of private universities in the Kanto region of Japan and taught classes at Daniel's institution twice a week. As Alex was not a full-time faculty member at any university, he did not have access to a regular office, academic resources, or a research budget. Consequently, over the last 2 years, he often visited Daniel's office to borrow books, share lesson ideas, and discuss

research and professional development. The week before the session, Daniel asked Alex to think of an issue that he would like to discuss or think of some questions he would like to base our conversation on. Alex decided on the topic of research as he was planning to move to a new workplace the following year and was keen to increase his activity in the areas of academic inquiry and writing. We then met in Daniel's office to ensure privacy and recorded our approximately 45-minute discussion. Upon transcription of the audio recording, we inductively analyzed the data for any points of interest or any themes relating to the existing literature on relational mentoring. From there we wrote, shared, and redrafted our respective reflections on our mentoring session in an iterative and collaborative process, moving back and forth between the transcribed audio data and oral and written discussion. In the following sections, we will reflect on our mentoring session and outline themes that we found to be particularly interesting in terms of our understanding of both our specific session and mentoring in a broader sense. The following sections feature the reflections that we drew from the original recorded data and the subsequent collaborative analysis we conducted.

Daniel: I valued my professional relationship with Alex very highly as I was struggling with what I perceived to be a lack of research collaborators among the full-time colleagues in my institution. Therefore, we came to develop a nurturing relationship of mutual trust that increased our professional satisfaction (Kato & Mynard, 2016) and reinforced our respective professional identities in the face of environmental constraints. According to Ragins (2012), trust "grounded not only in the commitment to the partner, but also in the commitment to the relationship" (p. 532) over an extended period of time is likely to lead to high-quality mentoring relationships. Therefore, I felt that the emotional foundations that Alex and I had laid over the preceding 2 years were likely to enrich the reflective dialogue that we would engage in during the mentoring session.

Alex: Having now worked in a number of universities in Japan, I think that for a part-time teacher, such critical friendships and learning opportunities are very rare. Mostly the expectation is to teach classes, and that is it. There is very little to no professional development or mentoring. One valuable exception so far has been the ability to publish in faculty journals. That being said, throughout my career in teaching, I have been fortunate enough to have a number of influential mentors—graduate school professors, school managers, and DELTA tutors. These professional relationships have been very beneficial and educational in terms of both teaching theory and practice. However, they have always been

based on senior–junior role dynamics, with me usually in the junior role. Therefore, I have always been interested in continuing professional development but had not really considered myself in a mentor role before working on this article.

Defining Our Terms

As previously stated, Alex indicated that he had an interest in pursuing a more active role in the field of language education through academic writing and presentations. Although he was an accomplished teacher who held a DELTA certification and had published a number of book reviews in the past, he confided that he still felt like an outsider in the academic sphere and found entering the world of research to be a daunting prospect:

> Alex: But in terms of doing my own research, and especially with my own data and publishing, that kind of research issue has been quite intimidating for me and difficult for me, because I'm kind of on my own, by myself. I don't really have a strong support network, or a more experienced community to show me the ropes, so to speak.

Daniel: In some ways, I felt that Alex was perhaps looking at our session from a more traditional mentoring perspective. From our weekly chats, he was aware that I was reasonably active in the research sphere. However, I was hesitant to reinforce a kind of *senpai* [senior] and *kōhai* [junior] dynamic in which I would simply pass him the baton in a "relay race" of knowledge between generations (Haghirian, 2010, p. 19) and encourage him to simply imitate what I had done. Instead, I utilized a big question to facilitate his interrogation of what he understood research to be and build his own response based on the definitions he constructed:

> Daniel: What do you think research is? What does that encompass?
> Alex: Well, to me, a classic definition would be exploring some area or field and contributing new findings to the field.

As can be seen above, Alex's definition was, as I later noted, "actually quite narrow." I could then use this insight as a stepping stone to explore how he might contribute something that fits within his own definition of "research." I reinforced this point by sharing my own

struggles as a beginner researcher with what I termed “the R word” and the narrow, limiting stereotypes that surreptitiously bleed into what we perceive research to be.

Alex: During the mentoring session, I expressed interest in conducting my own original “research” as part of my professional development, so Daniel asked me to define this term. It was challenging to formulate a clear and concise definition in real time. The main reason for this was perhaps that I have never participated in a genuine research project before. I have read many SLA books and articles, but the process of creating such studies has always been a bit of a mystery to me. Looking at the finished product is not the same as making it. I have never come up with a research question, applied for a grant, collected and analyzed data, interpreted the results, or collaborated with fellow researchers on a project. This largely made me feel like an outsider to the research community. In addition, in my MA TESOL program the emphasis was on quantitative, statistics-based research. So, when I eventually replied that research means contributing new knowledge to the field, I was mainly thinking of quantitative knowledge, supported by hard data. In the past, this kind of research had been intimidating, due to my lack of formal PhD-level training or a strong support network of more experienced researchers. However, Daniel commented that “research” does not only mean “large-scale quantitative studies.” This made me realize that my definition was somewhat narrow. I recalled that we had talked about the value and validity of smaller-scale qualitative studies or action research in the past. He mentioned that writing more qualitative papers within my ability or giving presentations and attending conferences are all viable avenues for research contribution and professional development. Working on this paper is a concrete example of this. As a result of redefining the term in my mind, I now have more confidence and motivation to do original research of my own.

Daniel: Also tied up with Alex’s image of research as “intimidating” was a belief that supportive colleagues were a prerequisite to engagement in academic writing or presenting. He stated that because he lacked a coherent community to support his professional development, it was difficult for him to take the first steps as an academic. This point was salient for me because it mirrored a similar issue that I was also dealing with in my own professional environment. During the previous year, I had moved from a professional environment where I was frequently engaged in research with colleagues to a setting in which I lacked such a community. Consequently, Alex’s issue drew me to a realization that gave me renewed perspective and inner strength and that I hoped would also serve him in the future.

Alex's feelings of isolation made me think about my own days as an isolated *eikaiwa* [conversation school] teacher and a key truth that the nurturing environment of my previous workplace had perhaps led me to forget: If you don't have a community, go out and build one. I realized that the network that I had gradually built from attending conferences, going to online events, and submitting papers to journals allowed me to stay engaged in the field despite my local community of practice (Wenger, 1998) disappearing. In essence, through this particular point, Alex created an intersecting point of experience for both of us which I felt contributed to the mentoring session taking on more of a near-peer (Murphey, 1998) dynamic in which we were "equally engaged as co-mentors" (Goosney et al., 2014, p. 8).

Alex: The value of networking was one of the key points I took away from the mentoring session. Daniel stressed the value of attending conferences and presenting, and the benefits these things can create in terms of networking. I was aware that researchers do these things but had never really considered the value behind them. I think it is a valid point that it can be difficult to create your own network, but it does not excuse passivity either. Being much more proactive in conferences and presentations is definitely something I should focus on.

Blurred Roles

Despite Daniel's initial concerns about the mentoring session taking on a *jouge kankei* [senior/junior] power dynamic in which Alex would simply inhabit the role of passive receiver of knowledge, things quickly evolved into something more interesting. In this section, we examine a marked egalitarian shift in our interactional roles leading to reflective learning for both mentor and mentee.

Daniel: As I previously noted, the opening minutes of the mentoring session came with some degree of trepidation on my part, stemming from Alex seemingly approaching our interaction in a transactional way, in that he wanted me to provide him with concrete solutions to his concerns. This initial concern, however, came to be unfounded. As the session progressed, I was surprised to notice a number of occasions where Alex turned the tables and engaged in reflective questioning that catalyzed intense self-analysis:

> Alex: So, when you were just starting out, can you remember an instance or experience which was kind of a milestone moment or a time when you went through

something very challenging, difficult, like in terms of research publication, professional development, and maybe it was intimidating? But then after the experience you were like, "Oh, okay. Now I have a different understanding of this whole process."
Daniel: I guess…Hm…, that's a good question…

When Alex asked me this question, the experience of doing an activity called "revisiting your best self" came flooding back to me. I attempted this activity, in which I revisited a past event where I felt successful in some way, in an advisor training course that drew upon various concepts from positive psychology. Similar to the positive memories I had been guided to revisit in the advisor course, vivid memories of participating in a book-writing project with colleagues came into my mind, and I was guided by Alex to come to new realizations about the importance of empathy and open-mindedness in the academic writing process. Although this was perhaps unbeknownst to him, he was taking on the role of mentor and facilitating my own growth within the session. As I previously stated, I was slightly taken aback by this and thought for a moment, "What has this turned into?" However, having revisited the existing literature, this seems to be indicative of a desirable mentoring relationship built on mutual storytelling and questioning where "the imbalance of power, such as difference in age and experience between mentor and mentee, is prevented" (Kato, 2017, p. 275). All in all, this blurring of roles that transpired as our session progressed signaled to me that Alex likely regarded me as an equal interactional partner in a *symmetrical* relationship of "equal rights and duties in talk" (van Lier, 1996, p. 175).

Alex: Perhaps the most salient point for me was when I asked Daniel to share a milestone moment or experience on the way to becoming a more experienced professional. My own such transformative experience was doing all three DELTA modules in 3 months. This course is usually extremely stressful and pressure-filled, requiring strong motivation and self-organization. There was only limited help from the tutors. At the same time, it can give the candidate significantly higher understanding in the classroom and confidence in job interviews and professional interactions with fellow teachers. So, in asking the question, I wanted to know if there is a similar type of experience in PhD-level training and conducting original research in general. Daniel's example seemed both similar and different from mine: similar in a sense that publishing a book chapter with a mentor was challenging, requiring motivation and organization skills, and different because his mentor made the research

environment welcoming and non-intimidating—in other words, less stressful. Sharing these transformational experiences can be an example of peer–peer mentoring between two colleagues with somewhat different professional backgrounds. Additionally, Daniel's comment that my "milestone moment" question put me in the role of a mentor was interesting. I consider him to be a more experienced researcher, but his comment raised my awareness of the value that less experienced practitioners can bring to the collaboration process. Working with people who have different perspectives can often result in self-reflection and learning, contributing to the more equal peer–peer dynamic.

Final Thoughts

The mentoring session and the subsequent reflective analysis that we collaboratively engaged in was educational, therapeutic, bonding, and, to a certain degree, transformative. Both of us were in different stages in our career, with different goals and mindsets, but through the shared desire to understand and develop ourselves and one another, we found a commonness and enhanced professional respect. In this final section, we share our final thoughts on what our mentoring experience meant to us and how it might impact our continued professional development.

Daniel: I felt our mentoring session was an experience of discovery. I came to understand the importance of establishing trust and how it can contribute to the mitigation of traditional hierarchical barriers to reflection. Furthermore, with relational trust (Ragins, 2012) established, I was (pleasantly) surprised to observe how quickly a mentoring session can take on a life of its own and create affordances for reflection, emotional support, and growth for both mentor and mentee. Finally, I hope that Alex came to see through our reflections how the relatedness and emotional support that he provided through our chats was just as important to me as the information that he got from me about the nuts and bolts of publishing or academic engagement.

Alex: Overall, the mentoring session was a valuable learning experience that made me reflect on the nature and value of peer–peer mentorship. Although I was aware of the value of collegial collaboration before, after doing the mentoring session with Daniel and reading his analysis of it, the concepts of collaborative mentoring and critical friendship have become much more concrete in my mind. Without the pressure and potential awkwardness of unequal

power dynamics (e.g., manager–employee), it is easier for professionals with diverse teaching backgrounds and research interests to share ideas, provide support, and learn from each other. Learning about how this type of mentoring differs from a more traditional mentor–mentee relationship has been a step in my own professional development. Regardless of my own experience level, there are always other colleagues and critical friends in the field who I can learn from and build supportive relationships with, based on mutual trust and respect. Working on this paper has also redefined the concept of research for me and has given me more confidence to continue actively engage in this new community.

Notes on the contributors

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