

Ako Ako: A Progress report on a Peer-Mentoring Pilot Programme

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We present a progress report on a pilot peer-mentoring programme for staff at a tertiary institution. Ako Ako is a Maori methodology of learning that acknowledges that both partners share the power base of teaching and learning. Peer mentoring replicates this methodology and requires a paradigm shift from traditional mentoring where one is deemed to have higher levels of knowledge and skills. In this process the group engages in an exchange of knowledge and skills to enhance professional practice. Although mentoring was occurring within the institute, no formal structure was in place. A need was established and a framework to support staff in the mentoring process was implemented.

Success experienced in an overseas experiment prompted our Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to encourage and support the implementation of peer mentoring. A working party, of a Nursing tutor, Staff Development Co-ordinator, Counsellor and a Computing tutor was formed to investigate the implementation of a mentoring programme. A private consultancy firm was contracted to provide the initial training. During the first year 10% of staff participated in the pilot programme. Participants reported that peer mentoring and the cross-pollination of experiences across different divisions of the institution supported their professional development by increasing and expanding ideas, providing broader perspectives and validating experiences. Tutors were able to include these into their own teaching practice whether it be in computing, nursing, art or any other discipline.

During the second year there was a decline in the participation rate as restructuring and audit factors impacted on staff time and resources.

Keywords

Peer mentoring, Peer learning, Ako Ako, Collaboration

1. INTRODUCTION

Ako, in Maori, means to both learn and to teach (Williams, 1992). This is the underlying philosophy for the peer mentoring process, unlike the traditional models, which portray the more experienced providing guidance to a younger member of staff. The peer mentoring process requires a paradigm shift in this thinking. Peer mentoring is about power sharing, a partnership and ako – the teacher learner role interchanging. It involves the group engaging in a ‘regular, dedicated

time for facilitated, in-depth reflection on professional practice the main goal being to enable the development of professional skills and competence.’ (Credos Associates, 2000, p.1).

The question arose, how do we as educators create a forum for peer mentoring that would facilitate professional development partnership?

To address this, a working party was set up to investigate the establishment of a peer mentoring programme that would meet the needs of educators within a regional institute. The pilot programme’s purpose was to define the pathway for a mentoring programme and to identify the benefits for individuals, professional practice and the institution.

This paper outlines the implementation of the pilot programme and the challenges experienced with an Ako Ako model of peer mentoring in a regional tertiary institution.

3. THE PRINCIPLES OF MENTORING AND AKO AKO

Traditional mentoring is based on the old principle of a wiser or more experienced person providing support, guidance and concrete help to the lesser experienced person (The Mentoring Institute, 2001). This idea is supported by Williams (2000) who adds that one person with ‘identified abilities or competencies’ is paired with another to enable the growth of the other. Both people gain knowledge, skills and positive experiences from the relationship, building trust and mutual respect.

Saito and Blyth (1992) defined classifications to describe the various mentoring models available in to-

day's dynamic society where change is the norm. The main classifications are group mentoring or one-to-one mentoring. These may be further defined as short or long term with the development goals of either soft skills (communication, relationship, advocacy skills) or hard skills (practical, application, career-related skills) (Sipe and Roder, 1999).

The Maori word 'ako' is interchangeable and means both to teach and learn (Williams, 1992, p. 7), also described as a process of reciprocal teaching and learning (Glynn, 1993). It recognises that the teacher and learner are engaged in a unified co-operative approach of learner and teacher as a single enterprise (R.Bishop, personal communication, Ako Maori lecture May 19, 1993).

'Ako ako' means 'to consult together, give or take counsel' (Williams, 1992, p.7) and implies a mutual teaching/learning discussion. This suggests the teacher and learner roles are fluid and at different phases there may be a switch as the teacher steps back to learn from the student/pupil. The teacher will gain knowledge from the learner's world-view and as this exchange occurs the teacher-learner dynamics often move to a higher level of mutual learning. This aligns with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory that interactive discussion, at a point where one is ready to take on new learning, assists the learner to move to the next step (Vygotsky 1978, 1987). Vygotsky also asserted that group discussion leads to learning and decisions that are more advanced than independent individualised learning.

Reports on peer mentoring with management students in a tertiary institute (Sutcliffe, Barrett and Smith, 1995) showed that both mentor and mentoree improved their knowledge and skills base. These results replicated earlier studies on peer 'paired-reading' in junior schools, where both tutor and tutee improved their reading skills (McNaughton, Glynn & Robinson 1987). Peer support groups often acquire a frame of emotive support (Boud 2002) and provide a stronger sense of mutual ownership within the peer relationship.

Group peer mentoring is a process of sharing stories of experiences and consulting together for the development of professional practice (Credos, 2000). This model matches people of similar organisational levels and provides a rigid structure of operation for the group. The group members share roles during the giving and taking of counsel and the parallel process denotes equality between peers.

4. THE PROCESS

4.1 The Implementation

Expressions of interest came from four members of staff who recognised that mentoring was occurring within the institute with no formal structural guidelines. A working party, of a Nursing tutor, Staff Development Co-ordinator, Counsellor and a Computing tutor was formed to investigate the implementation of a peer mentoring programme.

A series of meetings took place and the group discussed the following points:

- rationale for establishing such a programme.
- structure of the Peer Mentoring programme
- training content
- methods of training
- training facilitators
- target population
- risks

The working party reviewed literature of various mentoring models. The General Manager for Student Services attended a peer-mentoring course run by Credos Associates. On review of all information, a decision was made to adopt the 'Credos Model' known as 'The Power of Peer Mentoring' as this model has a focus on professional development. The model provided structures that enabled the needs of all group members to be met in constrained time periods and prevented verbose members from taking over. In this model each group member took a turn in the role of mentoree to present their own issue, share their own story and other members were in the role of mentors.

This model included eight structured processes that involved:

- sharing challenges/difficult incidents
 - sharing and learning from success
 - developing new/adequate responses for situations
 - exploration of professional issues
 - giving feedback to each other
 - supporting each other in the work
- (Credos Associates, 2000)

The working party invited staff to take part in this training via email and the responses were mainly from academic staff from six different disciplines. The first training took place in July 2002 and was facilitated by the Credos Associates.

From this day three peer mentor groups were established. The groups were encouraged to meet two or three times and then return for a review. Based on the positive feedback received at the review session, it was decided to offer further training sessions. Permission was given by Credos Associates for the working party to facilitate further training on proviso that the Counsellor was one of the facilitators. These sessions attracted allied and academic staff.

Over the next 8 months, the working party received further enquiries from other staff members who were keen to become involved in the peer mentoring. Credos agreed that the working party could run another training session on the same conditions as earlier. There were six peer-mentoring groups active at this stage.

Three months later the working party reconvened to review and reflect on the progress of the peer-mentoring programme. There was concern about the perceived decline in the regularity of group meetings. It seemed that participation rates had waned as restructuring and audit factors impacted on staff time and resources. At this stage the working party generated strategies to support and encourage the members of the peer mentoring groups. One such initiative was to provide a further training session as a means of enhancing the peer mentoring skills. Credos Associates were contracted to deliver an advanced training course that focussed on a higher level of peer mentoring skills. Following this session the working party met to review successes and challenges over the past year and reflect on the process.

4.2 Reflections of working party on the process

For members of the working party, it was an exciting time in that we were working as part of an interdepartmental team where our thoughts and ideas were discussed, suggestions made and finally the training sessions offered with 10% of the staff taking part in the peer mentoring programmes.

As participants in the first training group, we found one of the most important issues was to be able to build trust with the group members, as each one of us was part of a group whose membership came from the various disciplines or allied areas within the institution. It was vital to adhere to the time frames, be focussed on the task to be achieved and to ensure that everyone's needs were being met. We also felt we needed to practice the different processes within this model to ease the flow of the peer mentoring. It was important

to pre-plan the meeting dates to keep the momentum going.

4.3 Challenges and successes

4.3.1 Challenges

- Timing of the meetings
- Building of trust
- Non-adherence to set guidelines for peer mentoring
- Non-attendance of group members
- Organisational commitments

4.3.2 Successes

- Implementation of peer mentoring programme support
- Provision of a forum for professional conversation
- Provision of strategies to address issues

4.3.3 Future Directions for 2004

- Regrouping of all members at the beginning of the year over a lunch time
- Possibility of restructuring the groups
- Accessing peer mentoring videos
- Inviting new members as observers to the meetings, which might encourage them to participate in the training
- Disseminating peer mentoring information to other departments
- Involving new staff development appointee
- Writing a paper for publication or presentation at a conference

4.4. Reflections of Bachelor of Applied Information Systems Lecturer

The teaching to learning paradigm shift is being strongly influenced by educational, economic and political worlds. Given the inevitability of change, the challenge is to manage it. Provisions for professional development of staff can effectively reduce the trauma of change. Professional development is the best insurance any business or educational institution has for keeping up with, coping with and shaping the future (Peters, 1987). The new teaching paradigm requires teachers to have an inclusive and interactive philosophy of education. For many teachers this means that they must reinvent themselves, (Butler, 1992, Meiers,

1993) their skills, knowledge and philosophy. It is no longer acceptable to revert to the methods and approaches they once experienced themselves. Thorpe and Gallimore (1988, cited in Smith, 1992) refer to ongoing teacher professional development as “guided reinvention” (p.20). A critical component of this reinvention is critical analyses of one’s own teaching practice and methodologies.

The peer mentoring process provides a forum for professional development through reflective practice. According to Boyd and Fales (1983), reflection may be defined as “the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed conceptual perspective” (cited in Thorpe and Loo online).

As a participant in the working party and a peer mentoring group the programme was valuable from the perspective of personal reflective learning. The peer mentoring process was all about collaboration; the collaboration factor being critical in breaking down the power bases. The equal power base in the process is critical to development. Power relationships must be equal in order to establish the principles of mutual learning and professional development (Yeatman and Sachs, 1995). As an educator, adult learning theories are paramount in classroom practice, the goal being to provide the learner with an environment that is conducive to empowering the learner (Shor, 1991). The peer mentoring groups provided an opportunity for colleagues to share ideas, skills and techniques in order to learn, develop and improve professional practice. The skills learnt in this collaborative process provided an opportunity for two things in my personal development. One was the opportunity to reflect on teaching skills and transfer those into classroom practice. The second was the opportunity for professional conversation with colleagues in a constructive and supportive environment. The peer mentoring process has given me the opportunity to reflect on skills and transfer those into classroom practice, the overall objective being to improve the quality of teaching and delivery of the Bachelor of Applied Information Systems.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A need was identified and a working party set up to implement a peer-mentoring programme. Peer mentoring models were investigated and a model selected. The working party was successful in implementing a Peer Mentoring Pilot Programme, which pro-

vided a forum at a regional institute for educators to be involved in reflective practice. Critical to this process is the philosophy of Ako Ako, shared power base, the learner-teacher interchanging.

Future developments through the working party include looking at strategies to maintain the momentum of the current peer mentoring groups, restructuring issues and involvement of new staff.

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