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Transformative relationships: A case study of collegial partnerships which have enhanced personal and professional development

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Abstract

This interpretive case study explores a number of collegial relationships between allied and academic members of the student and staff support services team in a tertiary institution. In the literature around such relationships, there is a general consensus on certain commonalities: relationships must be satisfying, supportive, challenging and instructional. When it comes to effecting these relationships, a plethora of alternative approaches exists. This study sought to understand existing partnerships that were enhancing the levels of trust, autonomy and responsibility of each party, to better foster and advocate such transformative relationships. Four key findings were identified from the analysis of interview transcripts. First, that there can be no meaningful separation of the personal and professional aspects of the relationship. Second, relationships were fluid, rather than static, frequently moving from a more formal imparting of knowledge and skills to a reciprocal, transformational partnership where new capability and professional development could be clearly tracked. A third significant theme was that of generosity, evident in the desire to sponsor, to support, to mentor and to grow capability and capacity through to developing leadership potential. Finally, the relationships studied, in particular those founded within the Kahurangi unit – a Kaupapa Maori support initiative, demonstrated the extent to which strong collegial relationships can enhance the experiences of diversity groups within a large organisation. This study is significant for learning communities seeking to integrate theoretical and practical frameworks to enhance professional relationships which transform teaching and learning environments.

Introduction

Collegial relationships impact upon and enhance professional practice and team performance in many ways. When staff are empowered to collaborate as teaching and learning professionals, their involvement in and contribution to the success of the institution and its students is greatly enhanced. The term ‘transformative’ is often used in conjunction with discussions of leadership, to indicate an empowerment of a staff member that goes beyond the transactional passing on of established practice; instead the recipient is encouraged to push boundaries, to surpass their own expectations, and become an agent of change (Robertson, 2004; Smit & McMurray, 1999).

An ideal professional relationship is a “mutually enhancing process where the career development of both parties is addressed” (Kram, 1985, p. 26), and is therefore reciprocal and transformative, where critical reflection, the central premise of adult education, has occurred (Zepke, Nugent, & Leach, 2003). While much of the literature discussed below has focused on similar topics, this study incorporates at least two significant departures: the first is that these relationships have been self-selected and have evolved naturally, rather than having been fashioned through more formal institutional directives, where mentors and mentees are matched by faculty heads or managers charged

with staff development (Gorinski, Fraser, & Ayo, 2004). The second is that this study deliberately canvases experiences and opinions from allied (i.e., administrative) staff, as well as the academics more directly seen as involved with issues of teaching and learning.

This study seeks to understand existing relationships which have enhanced levels of trust, autonomy and responsibility to better foster and advocate further transformative relationships. Was it the personal connectedness which made these relationships work? Certainly, this factor is embedded in the explanations offered by each and every respondent. But it is the variety of ways in which this came about, in the individuals' response and the shifts experienced in the relationship and practice which have offered the richest and most significant data.

Collegial relationships

Professional benefits and the organisation's role

A growing body of research attests to the efficacy of promoting the development, practice and satisfaction in teaching and learning through enhancing professional relationships (Gray & Gray, 1986; Holloway, 2002). Carefully structured support programmes such as mentoring raise teacher retention rates through not only improving skills but also enhancing feelings of purpose and belonging (Darling-Hammond, 2003). For this reason, writers such as Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor (2002) discuss the need for guidelines to be provided if such professional support is new.

Exploration of the deliberate facilitation of the socialisation process (e.g., Cawyer, Simonds, & Davis, 2002; Simpson, Cockburn-Wooten, & Spiller, 2005) points to the critical importance of firmly establishing new staff relationships, of creating interpersonal bonds and of supportive social behaviours. Simpson et al. (2005) recognise that a greater part of the responsibility for socialisation and retention sits with organisations rather than with new staff members, especially in ensuring that adequate structures and resources are available. Without some institutional support many new staff will not actively experiment with new ways of being (Angelique et al., 2002). The institution's role therefore comprises the provision of mentoring programmes, the identification of experienced colleagues, the fostering of contacts and ensuring the accessibility of experienced staff, and offering new staff opportunities to enter into and develop meaningful professional relationships which enhance trust, autonomy and a sense of location (Holloway, 2002).

The traditional models: mentoring and coaching

Mentoring is the most popular strategy currently in use as an improver of workplace learning and as such is viewed as profoundly influential in educational as well as in business settings (Allen & Poteet, 1999; Holloway, 2002). Mentoring is usually an alliance or interaction between two or more people in a setting created for engaged dialogue which ideally results in action and learning for both. It is a chance to discuss vision and goals, to identify strengths and areas for development (Robertson, 2005). The real benefit is that learning is based on actual experiences, reflective observation of those experiences, the opportunity to question, analyse and brainstorm new ways of thinking, and then to try out new ideas in an environment which feels safe (Robertson, 2005).

Traditionally the mentor is an experienced and senior colleague working alongside a less experienced newcomer, with a strong sense of personal connection between the participants, focused, specific and encouraging feedback and elements of peer support, counselling, socialisation and coaching (Hobson, 2003). Coaching may be seen as an aspect of mentoring, but with a narrower focus, particularly relating to job-specific tasks, skills or capabilities (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000).

However, since both mentoring and coaching are typically hierarchical structures, top-down and unilateral, they may not necessarily ensure that the process will be mutually beneficial (Angelique et al., 2002) or lead to change: the mentor is often selected for particular qualities and characteristics which may perpetuate past models and pass on accumulated institutional wisdom (Smit & McMurray, 1999). Smit and McMurray argue that instead, transformational leaders must be created. They must be able to adapt and become more responsive to change, and to expand their own capabilities through

professional relationships. This observation becomes particularly pertinent when considering the way in which minority groups within the organisation are supported.

Collegial support for diversity groups

Conventional mentoring and coaching structures have not always supported minority or diversity groups well. Most traditional structures have tended to perpetuate a white, western, male academic style and manner which creates challenges for those of different ethnicity, gender, age or power groupings (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). Stalker (1996) identifies the sharing of experiences between women in recognised professional relationships with other women as a critical form of protection from institutional isolation. Sernak and May (2003) also describe the challenges for women in academia seeking congruence with their organisation's structure. Further, some members of minority groups are quite comfortable relating to an assigned mentor from a differing demographic background, while others would prefer a professional partnership with a colleague with the same ethnicity or gender (Gorinski et al., 2004).

So, the issue of power inequities inherent in diversity remains critical – can both parties to the relationship put to one side the issue of who traditionally holds the power in order to honestly offer growth and development opportunities, when the relationship itself may be mirroring wider, western societal power relationships (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004)? Stanley (2001) echoes this concern and proposes that any mentoring of Maori needs to nurture change leadership directly. He argues that the largest barrier to this is that much of the mentoring and other professional relationships occur within a western educational system which devalues Maori forms of knowledge. He states that utilising a collective approach will better develop collective strength, and that this may not be able to happen within institutions.

Metge (cited in Pacific Education Resources Trust, 1996) also notes the need to take into account Maori understandings of learning and teaching. In a Maori context, there is a strong preference to avoid singling one person out for praise or blame, and to recognise that individual achievement may be less important than being an acceptable group member. The relationship is central to the learning so the emotional tone is important, involving both the professional and the personal, the head and heart – something which does not always sit well within an institutional structure, and which poses challenges in the wider educational spheres of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Acknowledging the challenges of diversity and power inequities inherent in relationships means that each must be unique and special (Holloway, 2002), with respectful support widely available and context appropriate, within relevant, recognised and accepted paradigms and understandings (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Sernak & May, 2003; Stanley, 2001). Trust must be built on the knowledge that justice and integrity are operating and that power is shared.

An alternative paradigm: reciprocity

A different conceptualisation of relationships which works well for both mainstream practitioners as well as diversity groups focuses on reciprocal transformative relationships which benefit not only the participants, but also have the potential to develop leadership capacity and change institutional cultures (Gorinski & Davey, 2001). For such change to occur, collegial relationships need to be established with certain commonalities: relationships must be satisfying, supportive, challenging and instructional (Holliday, 2001; Rippon & Martin, 2003) and above all, they must be mutually beneficial (Smit & McMurray, 1999). These relationships tend to defy easy categorisation, although the literature includes a number of terms such as 'socialisation conversations', 'critical friends', 'counselors', 'sponsors', 'guides', 'peer pals' etc. That these relationships can provide rewards of meaning, fulfilment and usefulness is widely agreed, but there is almost as much definitional ambiguity surrounding these terms (Smit & McMurray, 1999) as there is about agreeing the proper roles, tasks and relationships appropriate to a more formal mentoring relationship (Gorinski et al., 2004). Yet, however we define these relationships, whether we see them as parts of a process or a process in themselves, we find that a positive personal relationship is the keystone of success.

Gehrke (1988) identifies the powerful and unique opportunities available within professional relationships for personal growth and development when reciprocity is practised. Reciprocal gift giving of energy, goodwill, expertise and time will expand the roles of both participants as the relationship develops, with increasing trust allowing further exploration of different characteristics (Lucas, 2001). Appropriate, constructive and timely feedback from both parties will assist in achieving clearly defined outcomes, and this will enhance the sense of growth and development, leaving both participants feeling valued and rewarded, with increased self-esteem and status through the reflective process (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000; Ovando, 1994). Thus, the relationship itself is not only supportive but also empowering as the reflection encourages the identification of skills, goals and pathways towards academic, social and political independence – and ultimately, leadership (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Essential attributes

There is a relatively unanimous agreement in the literature that successful partnerships require that both members of the relationship contribute, be engaged and have a transparent and shared understanding of the intended aims. Allen and Poteet (1999) identify trust as a baseline characteristic for safe, satisfying interactions, which Rippon and Martin (2003) suggest are often best guided by the staff members themselves. Ferrier-Kerr (2004) makes the point that a sense of connecting must be present for there to be any significant development within the professional relationship.

A holistic approach is critical, where respect for skills and knowledge becomes inseparable from simply liking the other and enjoying shared practice, particularly evident when the partners share a common ground of minority membership (Hobson, 2003). Relationships based on reciprocity allow both parties opportunities to flex and grow their skills and understandings through the opportunity to explore professional issues, so most will enter with a genuine desire for improvement (Hobson, 2003). Partners may or may not be seasoned knowledge experts, but it is critically important that they are objective, independent, self-motivated, and passionate about their work (Cawyer et al., 2002).

Methodology

The case study as research design

The study of relationships, with their interactions, patterns and shifts as a significant factor in understanding professional practice and development, is well matched to a qualitative case study approach. In this study, the focus was on illuminating and interpreting the experiences of those involved. Clearly, such a situational context is necessarily microscopic (Yin, 2003). Yet this multi-perspective, close study of practice looks to a holistic understanding of the interrelated activities of team members (Tellis, 1997), with the hope that insights into the processes, preferences and viewpoints within these relationships can contribute to the whole field of support in higher education (Young, Burwell, & Pickup, 2003).

Selection of respondents

The setting for this case study was the student and staff support team of the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic; members include a manager, academic learning advisers, international student support, health professionals, career guidance coordinator, literacy/numeracy specialists and student activity coordinators. Within this team, a smaller unit, Kahurangi, offers Kaupapa Maori holistic support which incorporates both pastoral and academic aspects to students and staff.

Initially, a number of team members were identified by the researchers as potential participants in the research, either as representatives of a specific area of operations, because they had been observed to have established strong professional relationships within the team, or because they had interesting stories to tell. Of 17 contacts, 15 team members agreed to participate. The demographic spread, shown in Table 1, is fairly representative of the student and staff support team's total population.

Table 1. *Research participants – demographic breakdown*

	Maori staff		New Zealand Pakeha staff		Total
	Allied	Academic	Allied	Academic	
Female	2	3	2	6	13
Male	0	0	0	2	2
Total	5		10		15

Ethical considerations

Where the researchers are members of the group under study, the issues of disclosure, transparency and negotiation of mutual expectations, aims and interest are particularly relevant (Flick, 1998). The researchers also faced the potential dilemma of proximity and familiarity with the respondents. For these reasons, extreme care was taken to adhere to the ethical principles outlined by the Polytechnic's own criteria, as well as those suggested in the literature (Flick, 1998; Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2003). To ensure protection of identity, individual voices are identified in the discussion of our findings by using the letters A to L, where the last letter L represents the combined comments of the four members of Kahurangi who chose to be interviewed as a collective. When respondents are talking about their partner in the relationship the name has been replaced with the letter X, which therefore refers to the subject of the respondent's discourse, and not to any one specific individual.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews, employing questions of an open-ended nature have been used to canvas perceptions and opinions, inviting insights from participants. Recognising the need to be careful not to become overly dependent on any one key informant, the researchers have taken care to corroborate individual impressions with emergent themes common to a significant proportion of the group sample. The form of analysis for this case study was one of qualitative interpretation (Gorinski, 2005) seeking affinities and characteristics. With the limited sample size, findings were not expected to be definitive but nevertheless do offer a reflection of a context-specific situation which has aspects of relevance and transferability to other team contexts, both internally and in learning support communities globally.

Findings and discussion

A range of relationships within the team have developed quite naturally and independent of any formal matching. Each was specific, self-selected and independently deemed significant, whether the relationship was between colleagues, or with the team leader. All were equally useful in supporting staff to growth. Analysis of the discussions/interviews revealed four interconnected themes.

Theme 1: Personal and professional – the holistic approach

It is very difficult to separate the personal and the professional. Most of the participants, and all of the women, spoke of the critical importance of knowing about each other's lives. Several spoke strongly of their belief that without knowledge of each other's context, there is a sense of meaninglessness to the workplace and by implication, a lack of commitment to the work:

It is essential to have – not a social relationship with people – but a personal one... when you don't know about people, it's very hard to work with them ... I think it's an important component within professional relationships. Personal comes after professional, but it makes it so much better (A).

Interestingly, another respondent provides the mirror image: “[It needs to be] a person whose company you liked. You *can* separate the personal and professional, but I believe the relationship goes a lot deeper if you genuinely like their company” (E: participant’s emphasis).

Socialisation conversations, around both work and non-work related topics, within both formal and informal settings, allow relationships to develop (Simpson et al., 2005), contributing to an increased awareness of one’s role within the institution. It is interesting to note that having a formal relationship in place will often encourage a more knowing creation of informal relationships, both of which need to be recognised. “It started off as a mentoring type of relationship where I’d ask lots of questions and be given advice ... over time, it became a bit more mutual and reciprocal” (A). The relationships all served a purpose in providing a sounding board for both parties, with personal and professional support at a level that the respondents felt was not reached by other relationships.

Knowing about family and showing genuine and active interest in personal lives contributes to building contextual knowledge about colleagues, and will inevitably lead to the discovery of other commonalities (Robertson, 2005). For example, one respondent noted that the fact that she and a colleague each had children of similar ages, and partners in similar work, established an immediate rapport. Through such pathways, partners in the relationship are better able to recognise and identify each others’ transferable skills and areas of strength, providing appropriate impetus and advice: “You become almost a supervisor, cum mentor, friend, adviser” (F); and “We’ve been friends ... doing quite a lot together ... learnt to bounce ideas off each other... and professionally, I’ve learned a lot about the political side of things” (H).

Theme 2: Transformational relationships – underpinned by change

Relationships are inherently fluid: one respondent noted that a particular relationship with a colleague had moved from “professional to personal for a short period of time [in response to a specific issue] now back to that professional setting again” (E). Change is a professional responsibility which all participants in this study accepted and embraced, recognising their opportunity to develop and improve through significant professional relationships: “We feel safe to disagree with each other – we have some pretty good debates – deconstruct, reassess, re-evaluate – that way we become reflective practitioners” (L).

Often relationships bring exposure to new ways of thinking. A number of respondents referred to differences in practice: “...workshops versus one-to-one, reading assignments when the student’s not there ... we feel safe enough to say ‘yeah, I shouldn’t do that, eh?’ or ‘I’ll try that next time’ ” (L). Another example of a shift in attitude lies in the following story:

The relationship started many years ago. X is a feminist – and I’m a person who likes to give feminists a hard time – in a joking way. X and I had a few run-ins over the years and as we got to know each other we developed a rapport... We were going to a few meetings together; I could see where she was coming from and it made me think – and I think it made her think as well – and I have the utmost respect for her (D).

Others note professional development as a direct outcome of the relationship:

We’ve done some things together, which has put us on a different level – conferences, presentations, rooming together – I started post-grad study, always encouraged by X ... the biggest thing for me is study ... I really came to rely on X (C).

Such changes were not restricted to the partner who may have initially required more of the support: “Over time, there is more mutual respect and wider range of shared experiences – the payback for me increases, where perhaps earlier on, it was me always helping” (I).

Following these personal and professional changes, institutional changes and benefits have also been evident: “I’ve grown intellectually and as a person – now if I don’t know, I find out, and I can say I don’t know, which has benefited my teaching immensely” (G). Other respondents report working together on policy, funding applications, Ministry reports and new programme initiatives.

Theme 3: Generosity – a central motif

The attributes most frequently discussed in the literature – trust, openness, honesty and respect were all mentioned by respondents in this case study. So too were professional skills: working with students and ways of practice; problem-solving and higher-order thinking. For all these, the underpinning characteristic was a real generosity of spirit and sense of goodwill in the sharing. The extent of the deliberate generosity evident in the desire to sponsor, to support, to mentor and to grow capability and capacity through to developing leadership potential was enormous – and largely unanticipated. Some talked of the “encouragement to spread my wings” (L), others about “pats on the back” (G).

An important component of this was feedback (Ovando, 1994). Professional respect for another’s practice benefits both the giver and receiver, as evidenced by these independent comments: “X is really good at giving feedback – you’ve done this well” (C); and “I have observed X with students and she’s really, really good, and I’ve told her that” (H).

The development of self-esteem and confidence, awareness of potential and of greater futures than previously imagined, came through discussion with allied staff who have new aspirations as a direct result of professional support from others within the team: “She motivates me to do more for my future, and I’ve never really had that before. I’ve had good bosses, but they’ve always been quite happy for me to stay where I am” (K). A particularly affirming story belongs to a team member who has moved from an allied position to classroom tutor:

She has given me the mojo for getting qualified, to change my life ... she helped me get goal-setting aligned ... didn’t let me settle back and just be ... encouraged me to ascertain what I was capable of ... and how, while parenting, the same rules can translate into teaching and into leadership roles, which is where I’m headed (G).

The sense of ‘pay it forward’ which Gehrke (1988) discusses as akin to a gift and exchange system was also widely reported, although not directly canvassed during the interviews: “In the future, I would like to be the person extending the hand – bringing them up” (K); “I would use her and my relationship as a guide for something I could do for someone else” (C); “Some of the things I’ve picked up from X I use in my work as a mentor [with others]” (D). Such a spontaneous enthusiasm for sharing success and enhancing the workplace environment for others is clearly the strongest possible indication of a transformative personal experience.

Much of the credit for the success of the relationships studied here lies with the transformational leadership that is evident. Smit and McMurray (1999) suggest that to champion learning and foster the growth of a collaborative team of practitioners, leaders need to work as designers, teachers, stewards and sponsors. And it needs to be done with generosity, even where this may mean losing a valued team member: “My next collegial relationship I hope to be sitting in X’s seat – never would have thought of that till I met X. I’ve always considered myself to be a secretary, not a manager” (K). As one respondent quoted, talking about the team leadership: “[it is] encouraging people to fly” (G).

Theme 4: Diversity – theory meets practice

In this theme, the findings reflect and complement many of the issues raised in the literature, with most comments related to the areas of gender and culture. Several women enjoyed working in an area mostly staffed by women, and talked about “sistership” (L), while one of the male team members was openly relieved to have a female collegial partner, for reasons of “professional safety”:

Most people in the profession are females – today, teaching young females is quite scary sometimes ... some of the things these immature students will say in class to a male tutor – just unbelievable. That’s where I’ll see X – ‘this happened today’. We’ve got this thing now, and she offers me fantastic advice on what’s happened or been said... (D).

Echoing Metge (cited in Pacific Education Resources Trust, 1996) who indicated that Maori often feel most comfortable operating as a collective, rather than singling out an individual spokesperson, the four members of the Maori Student Services Support Team, Kahurangi, elected to be interviewed as a group. There was no question but that culture was the single most important factor for all of them in their professional relationships:

The whole team operates as a whanau. [Our work is a] constant validation of kaupapa Maori services. It all comes back to tikanga. Why Kahurangi exists. All based on mutual bonds that come from being Maori. Being bound by kaupapa dictates everything ... permeates everything, for example, our strategic plan, and tikanga determines how we address that (L).

Within this understanding, all the other themes discussed above were evident, in a microcosm of the larger study findings. This group did not have to consider whether the personal and professional aspects of collegial relationships existed separately:

It’s part of our culture as Maori – we always try to look for links. As soon as you start, you go straight there with the whanau connections ...it’s natural. Like the first day for a new staff member, we start with a powhiri, and the rest of the day, we whakawhanaungatanga to build those relationships (L).

From knowing who each other are, comes a unity of purpose: “We’re all aware of what we’re trying to achieve here...wanting to do the best for Maori within this institute. We’re on the same waka. We’re defined by the same vision” (L).

Relationships within this group also showed similar shifts to those noted throughout the larger team. There was sharing of skills and support for the two members engaged in studying for higher qualifications, both in covering positions to allow release to attend courses and in academic assistance with assignments. Team members were empowered through being encouraged to join institutional committees, to accompany colleagues into the classroom and be scaffolded into team-teaching opportunities, and also simply by being valued holistically: “It is huge for me to be valued for the other skills I have outside work. I can sit in a meeting and not just be the note taker/administrator. I am encouraged to voice an opinion” (L).

Again, these relationships are marked by generosity. There was a lot of respect for the leader of this group, but all members were reluctant to see her role as different, and all agreed that the relationships were reciprocal – where one had strong business and strategic skills, another had strengths in karakia and waiata, a third an extensive institutional experience, the fourth a teaching background that guided the strategies for working with students. All respondents paid tribute to the collaborative and transformational nature of their practice. In this way, the data gathered directly reflected the Maori concept of leadership offered by one of the group: “leading from the front, from the back, and from the side” (L).

Clearly the issue of culture was critical to these respondents, yet even for this group, culture is only one aspect of the bigger picture. It is the informal socialisation aspect of most of the relationships identified which appeared to assist staff in becoming “credible cogs” (G) of the institution, while supporting an enthusiasm for personal and professional development.

Summary of findings

It certainly appeared that the personal nature of the relationship and the knowledge of each other's context and background is the single most important feature in order for change, generosity and diversity to flourish. This is evident in Table 2 where almost all respondents noted the partnership to have been reciprocal, allowing both parties to benefit from growth in capability, and where every respondent believed changes or shifts had occurred. Through such enhanced professional knowledge and skills, academic, political, and cultural proficiency, the practice of respondents has truly been transformed.

Staff also appeared to gain a stronger sense of location within the institution, which enabled more connection, loyalty and commitment to their colleagues and programmes. Many of the relationships not only empowered the participants in their current role, but clearly fostered a willingness to pass the gift on – to offer similar

Table 2. *Summary of shifts in capability and practice*

Staff	Gen	Cul	Rec	Sre	Shift in capability	Leadership
A			√	√	Growth in commitment to team, institution	
B				√		Recognise need for a formal structure and expectations
C			√	√	Started study. Presentations. Academic professionalism	Would use characteristics of current partnership to build on with others
D	√		√	√	Expanded thinking/attitudes. Classroom safety	Use skills in mentoring others
E				√		
F	√		√	√	Numeracy skills and institutional knowledge. Planning joint presentation	
G			√	√	Study. Move from allied to academic staff. A better teacher	Once you know how – can bring another on. Continual evolution
H	√		√	√	Political. Organisational. Shared reporting	
I			√	√	Improved professional practice – student relations	
J		√	√	√	Improved professional practice. Project involvement	
K	√	√	√	√	Started study. Aspirations for future	Move into management. Support others
L	√	√	√	√	Improved professional practice. Institutional involvement. Kaupapa/Tikanga. Reflection. Teaching skills	Turn taking within team. Collegial empowerment

Code: Gen—mention of gender; Cul—mention of culture; Rec—Reciprocity; Sre—Shift in relationship

support to others. The development of leadership is an institutional responsibility, which requires careful structuring and recognition of a range of pathways. To paraphrase the words of Darling-Hammond (2003, p. 13), great leaders create nurturing environments, and this is what will allow accomplished teaching to grow and flourish.

Consequently, the findings from this study clearly endorse the wealth of literature which shows that strong professional relationships benefit the individual as well as the organisation. They equally belong to the body of research which champions the place for reciprocal partnerships of mutual benefit, rather than solely focussing on the more traditional, formally appointed hierarchical structures of mentoring and coaching.

Implications for the institution

Our study aimed to identify relationships which work effectively in providing collegial support and opportunities for transformational change within our own Student and Staff Support Team. With the attributes which contribute to success now clearly identified, the challenge becomes to explore the potential for diffusion of the results in order to offer chances for changing and improving systems on a wider scale. Staff in the wider institution will be able to look at what is currently effective and seek to be involved in facilitating change on a larger scale. The diversity of approaches inherent in these naturally-evolving collective groupings, cross-gender and cross-power line structures, in-and-out of team pairings, and allied/academic support testifies to the value perceived in positive reciprocal relationships. It is hoped that developing a variety of transformative relationships in the future will complement the ongoing development of a robust mentoring programme within the institution.

Broader applications

An anticipated project is planned to employ an action research methodology to actively foster transformative relationships throughout the institution, drawing on the findings discussed in this paper. By tracking the development and outcomes of new relationships, it is hoped that the present awareness of the contexts and attributes conducive to strong professional partnerships will be augmented by additional data pertaining to the factors that facilitate collegiality, and the factors that create barriers. Such understandings will allow this practical experience to contribute to a more theoretical framework of how such transformative attitudes and behaviors can be best taught and promoted. In this way, the key themes identified here may assist like-minded organisations of higher learning, in a host of global settings, to emulate the drive to enhance individual and institutional capability through outstanding collegial relationships.

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