

Breaking into the Game: A Mentoring Program in Research, Writing and Publication for Social Work Academics

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The Context

Success in academia is a matter of 'publish or perish'. Research and publication are of crucial importance for the appointment, retention and promotion of social work educators in Australian universities. There are two main pathways into academia in social work schools: one through successful postgraduate study, in particular, through the completion of a doctorate and, the other through success in practice. The first pathway leads directly into academia and provides academics with knowledge, skills and experience in research. The second pathway is based upon knowledge and skill of specific practice areas. Academics entering the university via this pathway may have little formal research experience, requiring a gradual change in role from social work practitioner to educator/academic.

In the last decade, research activities have become as important as undergraduate teaching for the survival of social work schools. This can be a particularly harsh reality to face for a practitioner who follows the practice pathway into academia with limited postgraduate and research experience. While the type of activities that may have attracted these practitioners into social work education remain important, to ignore research and publication imperatives can be perilous.

There are a number of barriers for practice-based academics becoming competitive in the field of research. The most obvious is limited formal research and publication experience and the lack of confidence that comes from learning new knowledge and skills in an environment where their possession is taken for granted. In this context the task of becoming a competitive researcher, publisher and 'gainer of grants' can appear daunting and overwhelming.

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Tension also exists between the competing demands of undergraduate teaching and research activities. While accepting the importance of developing new knowledges in social work practice, most educators are keenly aware of the need to ensure that social work graduates have fully grasped the knowledge, skills and values that are essential for ethical, competent practice. Balancing hours spent in the preparation of teaching materials and responding to students' needs with the time it takes a beginning researcher to complete a successful piece of research can be emotionally draining and fraught with difficulty.

Gender may also provide a potential barrier to success in research activities within this context. Although women generally hold their own in writing on social work education in Australia (Ryan and Martyn 1997), research and publication may be more difficult for them as they are more likely to have heavy teaching duties, are primarily involved in field education, work part time and/or are on short term contracts (Sowers, Hoag and Harrison 1991; Fook, Cleak and Lindsay 1993).

Reliance on an informal support system for academics who have not established themselves as successful researchers appears limited within the university structure. More experienced academics are often struggling to balance their research interests with the supervision of higher degree students, teaching and administrative duties. The competition for research grants is challenging for all but a few very successful researchers and there is little room to have less experienced researchers on the team. Given these barriers how do inexperienced social work researchers 'break into the game' of research and peer-reviewed publication. One possible solution is to give them access to an academic mentor or a mentoring program. This paper presents and discusses an innovative group mentoring program in research, writing and publication implemented by staff of the social work discipline at the University of Tasmania. The authors of this article are the protégés and the mentor who were involved in this program.

The idea for the mentoring program was sparked by a presentation by the School of Nursing at the University of Tasmania. A group of female staff described concerns about their research profile and outlined their engagement of a mentor from a mainland university. Inspired by this presentation, the School of Social Work established a formal mentoring program for their staff.

At this time (1997), the Tasmanian School of Social Work was small with limited resources and a poor research record. The organisational context was one common to many schools of social work in Australia. The amalgamation of the Tasmanian Institute of Technology with the University of Tasmania meant a change in focus from professional education to an increased emphasis on research activities. The School's situation in the Faculty of Arts meant that its members had a number of distinct areas of difference in pedagogy from their colleagues. The social work course included a number of practice subjects, had two semesters of fieldwork and was subject to professional accreditation requirements. For staff, the tensions between a commitment to graduating competent professionals and the demands from the University for research output had not been easily resolved. Staff were teaching more hours per week than their university colleagues in other disciplines and spent a considerable amount of time providing supervision and consultative services to the field.

It had been recognised, however, that the incorporation of research along with the teaching and administrative activities of academics was imperative for the advancement of individual careers, as well as the survival of social work in the University context. The

necessity for this change was underscored by: staff appraisal mechanisms requiring at least two outcomes per annum in the research area, success in research having a high status in terms of promotion, and a proportion of school funding being tied to research output in the form of publications.

Mentoring

Goodwyn (1997) traces the origins of the term 'mentor' to Homer's story of Ulysses. When Ulysses was going away he put Mentor in charge of everything, including his son Telemachus. He wanted to ensure that Telemachus was not neglected, but instead should be developed and educated by a close relationship with an appropriately experienced and caring role model. Goodwyn (1997) writes:

There is a long tradition, across cultures, of such positive and caring relationships, and there has been much renewed interest in this whole dimension of human activity in recent years. (p.138)

There are a number of common threads in more recent definitions of mentoring. It involves a helping relationship between two or more individuals who are at different stages in their careers. The mentor (the senior, more professionally advanced of the two) is involved in fostering the development and facilitation of the advancement of the mentee or protégé (the more junior professional). The mentor provides support and guidance above and beyond the expectations of their position (Collins 1993).

Mentorship has been adopted and studied in the field of business and the corporate world (Phillips 1977; Clutterbuck 1985; Kram 1985) where the goal has been on the career and psychosocial development and advancement of individuals. It is seen in these fields as:

a new and highly effective means of identifying and developing high-flyers; to others it is a means of speeding and facilitating the induction of young people in general; it can also be seen as an effective door into middle and senior management for women subject to discrimination; finally to some it is viewed as a dangerous process that can amplify favouritism and exclusive networks within the corporation. (Clutterbuck 1985, p.1)

Mentoring has also been used for professional development within education, nursing and social work. In education it has been used in school-based teacher preparation (Caldwell and Carter 1993; Tomlinson 1995; Brooks and Sikes 1997; Goodwyn 1997), whilst in nursing, mentoring appears to have excited considerable interest and enthusiasm as a concept and an ideal (James and Proctor 1992; Roberts 1997).

While mentorship has been used and explored to an extent in social work, there has been some confusion because the term mentorship is used synonymously with supervision in some contexts (Taibbi 1983; Collins 1993). In a study of 430 social workers, Collins (1994) found that mentorship could be an important factor in facilitating the career development of both protégés and mentors.

In academia, mentoring can be one means of supporting faculty at a number of educational levels (York, Henley and Gamble 1988) and a career-helper/mentor can be valuable for advancement in professional development (Rawlins and Rawlins 1983). In terms of women and mentors in academia, it has been found that the lack of a mentor may lower the proportion of women advanced beyond the entry level (Robbins 1989).

The literature reports two specific examples of mentoring programs for social work academics, specifically designed to assist them with writing and publication (Berger 1990; Padgett and Begun 1996). Berger's article reports on his 'Getting Published' program. He worked individually with staff on preparing manuscripts with highly successful outcomes in terms of journal publications, conference presentations and successful grant applications.

Padgett and Begun (1996) report on the development of a writers' guild among junior faculty. The program had the specific aim of overcoming writing barriers amongst staff. Like Berger (1990), the authors report positive outcomes, both expected and unexpected. The expected results included journal publications, conference presentations and successful grant applications. It also reduced staff isolation and sustained productivity. Amongst the unexpected results was that the guild garnered resources that would not have been available to individual faculty members and was cited in faculty recruitment literature as a unique facet of the school. In contrast to Berger's approach, this program was run on a group basis.

The mentoring program at the University of Tasmania was developed with the aim of breaking down barriers to participation in research. It was a program that involved an external mentor, had a specific focus on research, writing and publication and was a group rather than an individualised program.

The Protégés

The staff who participated in the Tasmanian School of Social Work's mentoring program were all women and included tenured and contract, full and part-time staff. There was limited consistent research and publication experience among them although all participants had been involved in consultancy work such as program evaluation and had presented papers at national conferences. Two were PhD students, although one was in the early stages of her project. Two members had coursework Masters degrees. Only one of the four women had been an academic for more than two years and all were experienced practitioners.

All members of the mentoring group were committed to resolving the tensions between professional education and research within the academic context. They acknowledged the need to become active participants in a research culture and were excited about contributing to the knowledge base of social work. All were committed to changing the way that they prioritised their time and to acquiring new knowledge and skills.

The Mentor

An experienced academic who was accepted by all members was approached and agreed to take the position of mentor for a six month period. He had the requisite knowledge and skills, was on staff at a mainland university but had the advantage of prior knowledge and experience of the Tasmanian context. He was involved in community life and had commitments to activities other than work at the University. The protégés had met the mentor previously in a different context and all felt that they respected his achievements as an academic and trusted that he would be supportive.

A number of issues emerged as significant in the selection of the mentor. He lived and worked outside of Tasmania, which had both positive and negative outcomes for the mentoring program. On the positive side, distance meant that the protégés became more

self-reliant and independent, developed solutions to problems and shared their existing knowledge and skills. It also meant that there were no organisational conflicts of interest between themselves and the mentor. On the negative side, the distance meant that the mentor was unavailable to help resolve immediate problems or to provide a leadership role to maintain the momentum of the group.

It seemed ironic that a male was chosen to mentor four women. It could be argued that the selection of a male mentor minimised the importance of using successful female academics as role models. However the fact that the mentor was known to the group, had worked in the same organisational context and was trusted by all members outweighed the potential negative impact of gender.

The Program

The mentoring program was conducted in the form of four day-long meetings in Launceston which were held from August 1997 to mid-year 1998. Three of these were held at the University and one at a protégé's home.

The group decided to use the mentoring program to focus on three collaborative projects:

- 1) A study consisting of indepth interviews with a small sample of international students in the University of Tasmania's social work program;
- 2) A survey of Australian schools of social work re the needs of international students; and
- 3) An ARC Large Grant application to gain experience of applying for external grants.

Although the nature of the meetings varied depending on the needs of the members of the group, three significant, interdependent themes emerged that were common to all. The first related to the lack of knowledge and skills in research. The mentor had a clear role of providing formal input on particular aspects of research methodology e.g. designing questionnaires and interview schedules, analysing qualitative data and reviewing drafts of work completed. The mentor also guided the development of an ethics committee application and provided advice on writing and publication.

The second theme related to the need for a change in the culture of the group. This involved promoting the importance of research and stressing the need to balance research activities with teaching duties. An example of the struggle inherent in this change was that the informal research meetings gradually become dominated by discussion of teaching issues and student matters. The demands of teaching meant that weeks passed with seemingly little progress in the projects. The mentor was important in getting the group back on track. He motivated the group to refocus on its initial aims and encouraged members to problem solve and develop strategies to address the tension between teaching and research.

The third theme related to the general lack of confidence about the research process and the sense of being overwhelmed by the 'long haul' between beginning a project and submitting a paper for publication. There was frustration that progress seemed slow and by the third meeting with the mentor the group appeared to have 'fallen in a hole'. A number of reasons were identified for this including:

- 1) The honeymoon period was over after the initial burst of enthusiasm;

- 2) There had been less facilitating and coordination of the process by one of the protégés who had emerged as an informal leader but had become involved in school administration;
- 3) Some individual members were aware of pressure to 'get the job done' because their contracts were nearing review;
- 4) Group dynamics had been neglected and protégés' frustrations and doubts were not dealt with.

The mentor played an important part in the process of addressing these frustrations by facilitating positive, honest sharing in each meeting. A process called 'mind dumps' was developed to allow ventilation of feelings and expressions of doubt about the process.

Discussion

Outcomes from this mentoring program were generally very positive in terms of the projects undertaken by the group. By the final meeting in June 1998, two of the three projects were well under way and were ready for review prior to their submissions to journals. The grant application did not go ahead as the group decided to write up their experiences of mentoring and present two papers to a national social work conference.

Six months later, the conference papers had been presented and three papers had been submitted for publication. A firm foundation had been established for a research culture within the School and although there were some changes in staff, the School now had a strong commitment to social work research. The protégés identified a positive change in their perceptions of themselves as researchers. One of the four protégés became an active researcher at a high profile mainland university, and two members found pathways into higher degree study.

When reflecting on the implementation of the mentoring program the group identified a number of key factors that had contributed to its success. These included the importance of resolving issues around the completion of tasks, of maintaining confidence and motivation and balancing the demands of teaching and research.

Although the program was successful a number of issues were identified. The first relates to who should provide mentoring for inexperienced researchers. Discrete programs such as the one described in this article are time limited. There was no room for ongoing support and in hindsight it seems clear that three of the four protégés would have benefited from a longer program. The difficulty of expecting senior members to adopt this role was mentioned earlier and has been documented by Roberts (1997). She found in her study of Australian nursing academics that there was an absence of mentoring by senior colleagues. This was attributed to lack of time, competitiveness and territoriality.

Secondly, mentoring programs do not eliminate underlying structural and contextual issues such as staffing cuts, the generally lower status of women in social work schools and the barriers that are placed in their way as they attempt to advance themselves in academia. It is important to ensure that the development of a research culture does not result in oppressive working hours and more stress for academic staff.

Although aspects of this program may have been unique, many of the experiences may have relevance and applicability to similar academic settings in social work schools. A number of recommendations for future programs were formulated and collated according to group process and research tasks.

In terms of process:

- Encourage participants to identify specific barriers to research and writing and seek to find realistic, practical, achievable solutions to these;
- Deconstruct the 'mystification demons' about research and writing/publication;
- Validate and process the emotions within the group and provide opportunities for the expression of thoughts and feelings;
- Formalise coordination and leadership to ensure that these roles are legitimised and the day to day running of the group is assured;
- Make the mentoring program responsive to the group's changing needs; be flexible and renegotiate, if necessary; and
- Value group effort, collaboration and mutual support as highly (if not higher) than individual achievements.

In terms of the task:

- Spend time planning the whole research project from the proposal through to the structure of the paper before breaking the project down into tasks;
- Break tasks down into small sections that are congruent with the overall plan;
- Delegate tasks to allow for skill sharing;
- Prepare daily priority lists of tasks rather than waiting for blocks of time to work on research and writing. In this way the problems of getting the elusive block of time and losing touch with the research and its data are circumvented; and
- Ensure that access to knowledge and skills in research methods are shared on an 'as needed' basis.

In conclusion, we think that this group mentoring program provides a useful model for developing research, writing and publication activities among academics. It has the potential to provide a model for a culture of collaboration and cooperation in research activities by emphasising both individual work and, at the same time, collaborative effort, backed by the support of a mentor. It also enables protégés to achieve more as members of a collaborative group than they could achieve on their own. Although this program was designed to meet the needs of beginning researchers, it is potentially applicable to all academics who have limited experience of establishing ongoing research projects alongside the demands of a full teaching load.

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