The WIT Cohort: a case study of informal doctoral mentoring

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ABSTRACT Concerns about the quality and value of doctoral studies continue to be expressed by various constituencies. Cohort mentoring and professional relevance have been identified as significant opportunities for modernising doctoral education. This case study responds to the need for doctoral reform by exploring the process and outcomes of mentoring on a self-formed educational leadership cohort, a grassroots organisation called the WIT (writers in training) cohort. Analysis of this innovation from the members’ perspectives suggests that the cohort mentoring experience serves to enhance individual success and improve a particular graduate context. Results indicate that benefits were gained in three areas of professional growth: developing a sense of identity and belonging, support for learning and attaining dreams and experiencing a faculty–student support model.

Introduction
A faculty mentor’s reflection on the quality of mentoring in graduate school rings true,

Nobody talked about mentoring when I was a doctoral student. ... Then, the process of socialization into the world of academic professionals was hit or miss. ... It never occurred to me to complain. (Gross, 2002, p. 1).

The vision of the doctoral journey many faculty members currently hold is under pressure to change. If research institutions are to meet expectations for preparing doctoral students for academic and professional success, mentoring interventions are needed (Nyquist et al., 1999). As one solution, cohort partnerships offer a means for addressing student development and cultural change (Witte & James, 1998; Mullen & Kealy, 1999). As Murray (2000) emphasises, dissertation cohorts have a double agenda of providing support to those seeking preparation not only as scholars but also as practitioners.

Graduate faculty have been charged with preparing doctoral students for their future roles as well as rethinking their own roles (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000). To this end, as a dissertation supervisor I offer a picture herein of the mentoring cohort model based upon the dynamics and outcomes of a particular group. Although other
faculty may already be operating from the sidelines through non-institutionalised cohorts, this type of strategy for supporting the research development of students appears only sporadically in the educational literature (Cole & Hunt, 1994; Witte & James, 1998; Mullen & Kealy, 1999). The emphasis has instead been on formal cohorts and their more visible processes and results (Twale & Kochan, 2000; Horn, 2001).

**Purpose and Scope**

Mentoring cohort is defined as a collaborative faculty–student support group that brings together doctoral students and their academic mentor(s). As recognised in the adult education literature, dissertation cohort groups enable dissertation supervisors ‘to simultaneously manage a substantial number of doctoral students’ (Witte & James, 1998, p. 54). Students in cohort mentoring situations will have ‘opportunities to practice the very skills, thinking, and capacities that are needed to demonstrate to, and elicit from, others’ (Mullen & Kealy, 1999, p. 36).

Campbell & Campbell (1997) verify that faculty-led mentoring programmes produce benefits for participants. Mentoring cohorts that function powerfully as a compensatory network can increase student success, including for organisationally disadvantaged groups (Sandler, 1995; Blake-Beard, 2001). Notably, such structures are not only for those feeling a particular need for support. As Gross (2002) aptly and ironically asserts, ‘Mentoring, it turns out, is not compensatory support for the once-excluded. Rather, it represents an essential element of graduate education for all’ (pp. 2–3).

Research indicates that faculty–student mentoring cohorts can support numerous, salient outcomes. Benefits include: the integration of professional development and university requirements for a graduate degree (Huber, 2000; Twale & Kochan, 2000); persistence and retention, reflected in a higher completion rate than traditional doctoral programmes (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Horn, 2001); team building practices that maintain focus and direction and improve task completion (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Horn, 2001); scholarly writing activity for guiding professional practice (Mullen, 1999, 2001).

This discussion focuses on the similar issue of doctoral mentorship through study of a faculty–student cohort initiative developed at a southeastern university in the USA. The outcomes reinforce previous research, indicating that support, satisfaction, progress and completion are among those benefits reaped by doctoral cohort participants (Witte & James, 1998; Mullen & Kealy, 1999; Twale & Kochan, 2000; Horn, 2001). New steps forward in this study address the issue of cohort evaluation from the perspective of the participants within an informal mentoring context.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

*Role of Doctoral Education*

The broad question informing this study is: ‘How can we re-envision the PhD to
meet the needs of the society of the 21st century?’ (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000, p. 2). More specifically, I examine a promising cohort innovation by asking, ‘What is the process and effect of mentoring on a grassroots’ doctoral cohort in education, the WIT (writers in training) cohort?’ As such questions suggest, expectations for doctoral preparation within research universities have recently changed in a particular direction. Accordingly, it is imperative that faculty work creatively in order to foster student learning and success.

Some post-graduate faculty may wonder why we are being asked to function beyond our roles as instructor and advisor. Specifically, why are we being expected to help develop our students as scholar-practitioners instead of strictly as intellectual academics? Partly in response, the role of ‘intellectualism’ is changing in society. Many doctoral students and graduates work outside the academy in a variety of professional capacities (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000). A growing demand exists for graduate programmes to become aligned with the current needs of the professions, especially in the applied knowledge disciplines. For example, leadership programmes have been seriously criticised for failing to integrate concepts that are useful for ‘solving real problems in the field’ (Murphy & Forsyth, 1999, p. 15). The expectation that doctoral programmes should have real world relevance presents opportunities for faculty and students to work more closely together. Herein lies the solution of the cohort.

Re-envisioning doctoral programmes with issues of relevance and collaboration in mind challenges higher education (HE) faculty to come of age. This mission calls for new professional involvement through the establishment of mentoring cohorts (Twale & Kochan, 2000; Horn, 2001), as well as cooperation fostered among students, faculty and employers (Nyquist et al., 1999). Besides ‘retooling’ outdated doctoral programmes, we need to reconsider what an ‘intellectual’ is and does. For many studying educational leadership, this word connotes elitism and exclusivity. Consequently, in the WIT cohort intellectual has been redefined as a scholar-practitioner who makes informed decisions on the basis of empirical study.

Models and Outcomes of Mentoring

Traditional mentoring. The call for promising alternatives to unsatisfactory guidance from graduate institutions arises from student testimonials and research outcomes. Interestingly, while doctoral students view an advising and mentoring relationship as ‘the single most important element in graduate education’, it is ‘often perceived as the most disappointing relationship’ (Henrich, 1991, p. 515; see also Styles & Radloff, 2001). A recent large-scale US study arrived at similar conclusions. More than 375 doctoral students reported ineffectual mentoring from their dissertation supervisors (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000). Furthermore, an international study of 139 new graduates found that support from mentors for publishing their doctoral research was lacking (Dinham & Scott, 2001).

Other mentoring studies have also described abandonment, isolation and frustration as frequent consequences of one-on-one mentoring relationships (Mullen & Kealy, 1999; Horn, 2001). Of course, positive benefits can also accrue from formal
mentoring relationships that depend solely upon a single relationship or dyad. Research in corporate and educational settings identifies, as examples, the development of confidence and self-regulation (Blake-Beard, 2001; Styles & Radloff, 2001).

**Cohort mentoring.** An individual’s progress and success can increase, and rather dramatically, with the support of a mentoring cohort. Holistic learning (academic, professional and personal) may be better enabled through the group context. Also, the opportunity for identification with a group focused on similar goals is provided; professional identity (i.e. as a scholar-practitioner), though it presents a more active challenge, can also be fostered (Twale & Kochan, 2000; Blake-Beard, 2001; Horn, 2001).

Mentoring cohorts are forums for building the academic and practical knowledge necessary for success in one’s chosen field. Those majoring in educational leadership, for example, will need proficiency at problem solving, empowering others and promoting diversity, all necessary skills for fostering learning communities (Twale & Kochan, 2000). A strong research capacity is also expected of school leaders in making informed decisions that support positive change in one’s environment. Additionally, performance standards call for a facility with scholarly activity: collecting and analysing data, writing and evaluating and interviewing and observing (Lortie, 1998).

Reflective learning that neither sacrifices the value of scholarship nor the growing demands of the workplace is a goal for doctoral cohorts (Horn, 2001). Cohort mentoring structures have the strong potential to ‘bring the obscure process of professional preparation into the light, to expose it to critical scrutiny, and to regularize its practices’ (Gross, 2002, p. 2). The WIT group in my context is a testimony to Horn’s (2001) message that the cohort model is a precious but insufficiently tapped resource in HE.

Cohorts that have a dissertation focus are especially valued. These confront the perennial problem of student disillusionment and academic failure as well as writing and inquiry challenges (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Horn, 2001). A participant in my study reinforced this message: ‘Everyone knows that many students finish classes but do not earn a doctorate. Our cohort helps me stay true to completing the dissertation’. Cohorts that promote student-centred inquiry report such documented outcomes as research and writing progress, real world application, professional development and collegial sharing and friendship (Twale & Kochan, 2000; Horn, 2001). Benefit also accrues from experiencing coherence in what one is learning, as a WIT student shared, ‘Traditional courses are all about work for others and nothing connects, and then you’re supposed to spend years writing a dissertation alone. I had resigned myself to this vision until the WITs helped me to see this is old school philosophy’.

**Formal mentoring.** The term formal mentoring programme is used frequently in educational and corporate studies. It carries two different meanings: (1) a one-on-one relationship between a mentor and protégé that is predicated upon assignment to the relationship (see, for example, Orpen, 1997); (2) a cohort that has been
institutionalised and is led by a qualified mentor(s) for a limited time and according to a predetermined schedule (Twale & Kochan, 2000).

Research on cohorts deals more with formal than informal mentoring because the institutionalised option is both visible and familiar (Twale & Kochan, 2000). Horn (2001) adds that the advantages of the formal structure (e.g. developing critical skills in writing and research) usually outweigh the drawbacks (e.g. new faculty mentors must adjust to pre-made, unfamiliar cohorts.)

Informal mentoring. Informal mentorship is spontaneous and supported through the mentor, consequently, these relationships are not managed, structured or officially recognised (Chao et al., 1992; Blake-Beard, 2001). Informal mentoring means higher risk, as the assistance promised to an individual ‘is simply left to happen – or not’ (Orpen, 1997, p. 54). Informal mentoring is also differentiated from formal mentoring through greater identification between parties, more interpersonal contact, a longer duration and a mentor akin to being a ‘developmental supporter’ rather than a ‘good organizational citizen’ (Blake-Beard, 2001, p. 333).

Those studying corporate management have found that informal mentoring tends to yield greater benefits for protégés than formal mentoring (see, for example, Blake-Beard, 2001). Unfortunately, few descriptive studies of informal cohort mentoring in education have been published (Mullen & Kealy, 1999). Research has shown, though, that informal mentoring cohorts focused on school–university research (see, for example, Mullen & Kealy, 1999) and doctoral supervision (see, for example, Cole & Hunt, 1994) do offer advantages.

New exploratory territory concerns informal doctoral cohorts that have operationalised formal structural elements. Such operations include management, expectation and scheduling (for an example of this hybrid model, see Mullen, 2001). However, given the over-emphasis in the literature that differentiates formal from informal mentoring, this perspective has yet to be forged. To this end, I present a view of the modified informal cohort that thrives in part because of its structured components; bimonthly meetings, turn taking, and guidelines for producing work. Conversely, formal cohorts that integrate such informal elements as psychosocial growth to achieve goals are more familiar (Horn, 2001).

Background Story: how the WIT cohort came to be

Because the faculty mentoring loads are unusually heavy in my education programme, some doctoral students had ‘fallen through the cracks’. Consequently, over the last 3 years many individuals have reached out for my help [1]. The overwhelming need for mentoring influenced my decision to respond proactively. Also, the experience of having developed and evaluated new scholar conference programmes taught me that mentoring interventions appeal to protégés.

A network generated momentum at my university. Although the one-on-one mentoring that was occurring was reasonably fruitful, something more was needed to catapult the learning experience of my students [2]. As recognised in the research, ‘greater student contact with mentors will be associated with greater academic gains
by the students’ (Campbell & Campbell, 1997, p. 740). Orchestrated group mentoring became the logical answer. After being reassured that a more collaborative, peer-based alternative was to everyone’s liking, I created the WIT cohort, named by the members for their self-image. The goals articulated at the first meeting underscored our commitment to building relationships dedicated to dissertation research and creating a safe place for critiquing work.

Currently, students whom I agree to supervise ‘contract’ with the WIT cohort. They agree to participate in critiquing others’ work (e.g. literature reviews, research instruments, doctoral proposals, dissertation chapters and conference proposals) for mutual gain. Everyone’s work is incorporated on a rotational and as-needed basis into this cohort design. One might expect that students would find this demand for group ownership overwhelming and even at odds with their more immediate needs. However, my outcomes, consistent with the research (see, for example, Twale & Kochan, 2000; Horn, 2001), suggest otherwise. The WITs make use of the cohort at will but are also encouraged to attend the sessions, and each member in turn has the expectation that this system of support will continue through graduation.

Study participants described the WIT cohort as ‘a safe place where we meet with our mentor to have scholarly debate and interaction on things we are learning and struggling with in our research’. The WIT group was also likened to ‘an experience that is personal to our writing yet general to all of us, as our mentor pulls out issues that concern everyone’. The ongoing scholarly needs of the members are met to the extent possible through the agenda collectively produced for each meeting, which features the works to be discussed. This is a potential win–win situation for all involved in the dissertation enterprise.

Orchestrated, informal cohorts can give participants more advantages than either formal cohort arrangements or traditional programmes. The attraction is that the dissertation supervisor and one’s students can gather, without undue hindrance, to work together. A peer-based structure that represents all stages of doctoral study, from entry to candidacy, contrasts with a generic model built upon student homogeneity, the academic calendar and assigned mentorship. Networks that originate through word of mouth can have ‘buy in’, where members have made what they perceive to be a good investment.

The WIT cohort meets biweekly at the university and my home for 5 hour sessions. Scheduling reflects the availability of individuals, lowering the frustration of formal cohorts that must abide by the university’s fixed calendar (Twale & Kochan, 2000). While sponsorship of the WIT cohort has not been forthcoming, a thriving mentoring network was built and sustained.

**Characteristics of the WIT Cohort**

The WIT mentoring cohort consists of all the doctoral students whom I serve as the dissertation supervisor. (We refer to the cohort itself as the WIT and to the individuals as the WIT’s.) The 25 members are at varying stages of involvement in a school leadership preparation programme. While some members are currently in the coursework stage, others are in doctoral candidacy, busy writing their disserta-
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Individuals’ ages span 26–55 years, and most are married with children. This multilingual group of male and female Americans includes European-Americans, African-Americans and Latinos.

These part-time students work full-time, mostly in the role of assistant principal at the elementary and secondary grade levels; others are K12 teachers awaiting their first administrative posts. Two early career headmasters provide leadership to their schools and within the cohort itself. Individuals share the aspiration of becoming school principals and district superintendents; only a few have expressed interest in the professoriate, either once retired from their school leadership posts or as part-time adjunct faculty. One student, the WIT manager, performs in a peer leadership capacity.

A variety of dissertation topics spans the interests of the WIT group. These result from each member’s personal selection of a topic of significance, as reinforced in the literature. Dissertation topics cover such leadership issues as the development of effective mentoring structures for assistant principals. While this approach to mentoring may sound familiar enough, it is not the only one. A different dissertation model features ‘lines of inquiry’, selected by the major professor for their relationship to a larger focus, such as social roles, and represented in individual dissertations (Witte & James, 1998).

Prior to the establishment of the WIT cohort, students had experienced problematic mentoring relationships in the academy. Common experiences concerned poor support and communications, negative feedback on writing and a lack of guidance with respect to university policies and procedures [3].

Data Methods and Collection

As researcher of the WIT group for this study, I had the unique opportunity to learn about this experience from the members’ perspective. Campbell & Campbell (1997) have called for evaluations of existing university mentor programmes that incorporate participants’ perceptions.

Fifteen WIT students were invited to participate in this pilot and everyone was both interviewed and surveyed [4]. The instruments I had developed were reviewed by the WIT manager, a paid researcher. Validity was increased through the process of private student interviews; honest disclosure was encouraged at the onset and for each question asked. Sharing was anonymous; the interview transcriptions were forwarded to me as a single set and without any identifiers. The student interviewer also managed the audio tapes, keeping their content confidential and destroying the tapes once transcribed.

When self-reporting measures are used as the basis for a study, especially from within a single organisation, limitations are inevitable. Because these parameters define my own case study, I sought creative opportunities for deepening insight. Valuable learning can come from a probing analysis using several instruments or different methods for eliciting understanding (Seidman, 1991; Witte & James, 1998). To this end, data were collected using a reflective activity sheet and an
interview protocol. Participants completed these sequentially as an opportunity to build reflection.

The interviewer received guidance on the protocol that I had produced. Pacing, probing, active listening, clarity seeking and systematic coverage of the questions asked were all practiced. The interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes each, targeted nine open-ended areas for reflection.

1. Describe what the WIT means. Does it have any personal meanings for you?
2. What influence, if any, does membership in the WIT have in terms of your personal experiences?
3. After you became a member of WIT, did it change anything about your experience in your doctoral programme in education?
4. What influences enabled your membership in the group? Did your doctoral supervisor play a role? If relevant, describe her pedagogical style in this context.
5. Have you had an experience with this cohort that has influenced your professional development? If so, please describe.
6. What specific skills are you developing in the group that you may not be developing elsewhere and that you would not necessarily develop on your own?
7. What do you like best about the WIT cohort experience thus far?
8. What do you like the least or think needs to be improved? What advice do you have for your doctoral supervisor in making changes for the better?
9. Once you graduate, do you think you will have anything to offer that is unique or different as a result of having had this cohort experience?

Strategies were used to ensure neutrality, especially given the focus on an organisational effort that I have created and continue to lead. By having someone else collect and manage the data, I was able to maintain objectivity, monitor my own influence as an authority figure and give participants the opportunity to express themselves more openly. The interviewer was enabled in her own role through the trust that had already been established within the group.

Objectivity was enhanced by the contributions of two qualitative researchers, selected because they work outside my university and are proficient at analysing data. They separately identified salient themes in the interview transcriptions. Miles & Huberman’s (1994) established coding system was used to guide the independent analyses. The student interviewer organised and displayed the results in a matrix that incorporated my own analysis. Benefits highlighted gains in these major areas of professional growth: developing a sense of identity and belonging, support for learning and attaining dreams and experiencing a faculty–student support model. What follows are my narrative descriptions of the patterns.

Issues Raised by WIT Participants: an emergent analysis

Developing a Sense of Identity and Belonging

Students reported that, by joining the WIT cohort, they had taken personal responsibility for developing as a new scholar. The WITs had not been prompted to
discuss scholarly identity *per se* during the interview, yet most did, which adds to the authenticity of this particular issue.

Scholarly identity was described as a developmental learning process, aided by academic socialisation within the doctoral group. Participants spoke about how an identity was made available to them through the cohort, similar to the one being sought. The identity they accessed was expressed in this way, ‘Switching from another major professor gave me an immediate identity and ways of working with a support group that were not previously available’. The identity that individuals brought to the WIT group and developed was shared to this effect: ‘My goal is to become a highly effective principal, which became more real to me after I joined and saw that we share a commitment to improve schools’.

Comments about group identity highlighted the value of having access to feedback from peers and beyond one’s dissertation supervisor: ‘Having that sense of identity as a group is beneficial, unlike in the case of someone who struggles along, doing whatever the major professor says, and not having anybody else to work with’. Support for scholarly writing from a HE group was underscored, ‘I now have a network available to me, people I e-mail for procedural information and reactions to my scholarly work. Ours is a hidden cohort that works in ways unappreciated by outsiders’. This last comment draws attention to the synergy that can come from informal mentoring networks that focus on sharing work.

Overarching perspectives here suggest that scholarly identity carries two related meanings within a cohort context, one already made available and one developed with others. Support for learning beyond the traditional supervisory relationship and through cohort mentorship was identified as a value.

*Support for Learning and Attaining Dreams*

WIT participants viewed support from an academic network for learning and attaining dreams as motivational. Positive benefits were described as advances in research and writing through community-based expectation. As one WIT student described, ‘As a cohort of writers, we really support each other to stick to our timelines, goals and development as scholarly writers’. Those referring to how they naturally turn to the group for renewed commitment shared this perspective, ‘Sometimes it’s hard to get back to the necessary disciplined grind of dissertation work, but then I regain focus in the WIT group!’

Support for learning was associated with such structured group dynamics as procedures for sharing and reciprocity. As someone explained, ‘We work through writing on a rotational basis, depending on who needs what and when. This inspires us to have something ready for each meeting. Normally students don’t experience these types of motivational scenarios’. A consensus view was that those who ‘have a technical and motivational problem with writing but who see a higher purpose in this activity’ are encouraged. Most expressed difficulty with writing and feeling motivated to do so; the cohort offered them a remedy, as personal scholarly gains were attributed to it. Academic progress was viewed as stages of doctoral advancement from coursework and examination through to the dissertation.
Sharing, another issue discussed in the interviews although not prompted, presented a challenge (e.g. ‘I’m still learning how to share my work and tips for success’ and ‘As the WITs help me, I return the favour. You’d think we’d know how to share very well by now but we do not’). One would naturally expect aspiring school leaders (adult learners) to share their ideas, resources and writing. However, even in the context of mutual gain this may be less common than expected, especially for graduate students. Many are socialised to view learning and, by way of extension, writing as competitive processes concerned with the self only (Mullen, 2001). Peer mentoring can counter this problematical training.

Though the adjustment to groups may initially be difficult, the atmosphere of mutual support and sharing provides ‘a safe haven for bouncing off ideas’, a condition believed necessary for making doctoral success attainable. Lieberman & Grolnick (1997) emphasise how collegial contexts need to promote a feeling of safety if they are to help students meet goals. Healthy graduate cohorts have been characterised as ‘safe refuges’ where individuals can experiment, try new ideas and take risks with learning (Mullen & Kealy, 1999). The WITs described the group as a ‘safe place’ for expressing ideas ‘that pop into my head’ and for ‘learning to listen to my intuition as a new scholar’.

The safe environment that was described for experimenting intuitively with one’s research ideas was attributed to two sources: the faculty leader, described as an ‘open-minded mentor knowledgeable about many alternative ways of thinking’, and the group itself, characterised as ‘a support network to grow with and learn from, a group that helps you achieve your goals’. Emotional security within cohorts is crucial for students, especially those not traditionally heard (Twale & Kochan, 2000; Horn, 2001).

The WITs viewed the cohort, and its various supports, as a catalyst for making their goals achievable and dreams realistic. Someone summed up, ‘The group “keeps my feet to the fire”, which makes my dissertation much more attainable to me’. Importantly, students implied that success is fostered within a mentoring context that holds members accountable for each other’s progress and their own.

**Experiencing a Faculty–Student Support Model**

Other conditions that enhance learning, sharing power, showing respect and valuing collegiality in the formation of a scholarly writer identity, were emphasised as advantages of the WIT cohort by its participants. These elements of a faculty–student support model seem essential not only to foster the identity of doctoral students but also to improve doctoral education.

As one issue, the role of faculty in enabling students as partners in the formation and evolution of a cohort was highlighted. As one WIT member reflected, ‘We like how we can come to the table and create the focus and direction of the group as a team’. Another echoed, ‘Our leader decenters power by truly engaging in collegial interaction, treating us with respect and empowering us in other ways’.

Cooperative learning was cited as another example of empowerment: ‘Our group doesn’t function top down. It’s more an active co-creation where learning is
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cooperative’ and ‘We all have a say in what WIT writings will be studied for each meeting as well as which theorists will be discussed. This makes everything we do meaningful and timely’. Someone else explained how we had read the literature on interviewing when this needed to be understood in practical terms. Empowerment was also attributed to experiences of fellowship and camaraderie: ‘Our mentor creates an atmosphere of connection and makes group decisions with us, eliciting our opinions’.

Although this faculty–student cohort functions with a professor as leader and a student as manager, the data support the fact that power sharing occurs across status and rank. A frequency count of the words used by the interviewees to describe sources of attribution that enable scholarly growth highlighted the power of the group (e.g. ‘support network’ and ‘scholarly writers’) more often than that of any leader (‘major professor’ and ‘mentor’). Regarding the leader’s role, the perception shared is one of an academic mentor that orchestrates student development and facilitates decision making processes.

Scholarly writing critique within the cohort illustrated the dynamics of power and empowerment in the data. Although ‘no one likes criticism’, the interviewees typically attested ‘the WITs need to learn how to write more reflectively and how to accept criticism’. A few had at first felt ‘wounded’ by my ‘probing purple writing’ appearing on their papers. This example was used to describe how becoming a scholar means developing a writing habit and ‘welcoming comments that support the goals of learning how to write more reflectively and how to accept criticism’. The growth of the group around what was experienced initially as feeling ‘wounded’ supports reflective learning about scholarly development. Because of the perspective offered, potentially disenfranchised power relationships appear to have been circumvented; this anecdote serves as a reminder that doctoral mentors must find ways to engage in ‘sensitive management of the writing process’ (Styles & Radloff, 2001, p. 102).

Similarly, other researchers have found the issue of critique within doctoral groups to be salient (Caffarella & Barnett, 1997, 2000; Mullen, 1999). Outcomes suggest that students respond positively to the interactive critiquing process for the objective view it provides of their writing. The issue of power has not been sufficiently raised in this context, even though the critiquing process has been identified as highly influential in producing scholarship that doctoral committees find acceptable. While it is helpful to know that students value a critique that is personalised and ongoing, the more subjective struggle involved in arriving at this place of openness has yet to be explored.

Discussion

Striving to create a portrait of doctoral mentoring that faculty may find useful, I adopted several particular strategies. First, a more refined analysis of the data was performed from which five additional positive outcomes were identified.

1. Opportunity to connect with others (‘You get support from others going through the
same process, facing the same challenges, who are ahead or behind where you are at in their studies’.)

2. Increased feeling of confidence (‘I feel more confident knowing I’m not doing my dissertation alone’.)

3. Familial support system (‘I’m now able to commit to the long haul as part of an academic family, which I was needing, with interactions beyond my mentor’.)

4. Discovery of reciprocal learning (‘I thrive on how we bring out the best in each other, review each other’s work and give suggestions’.)

5. Holistic development as a scholar-practitioner (‘I’m experiencing mentoring of my whole person’.)

Second, evaluative questions asked of the WIT interviewees were formulated in such a way as to elicit strengths and weaknesses about our process (e.g. ‘What do you like the least or think needs to be improved?’). However, the feedback provided about drawbacks was rare. Most responded that they have not had any problems with the group or their mentor outside their personal growth struggles. Concerns paled next to the strong affirmations for the learning involved in the cohort and support of this effort.

As one possibility, the students felt no need to complain because the open communication established within the cohort made it possible for their voices to be heard all along. Multiple conduits (e.g. cohort sessions, office meetings) are utilised to express our thoughts and feelings. Problem solving takes many forms within the group. For example, two WITs who fell behind for personal reasons considered dropping out; they were encouraged to draw strength from us to manage the crisis while staying the course. Both persevere to this day.

Comments of a critical nature that were expressed in the interviews served as material for reflection in this paper and to improve the operations of our group. Notably, one person asked that afternoon sessions at my home be moved to mornings. Another wished our sessions were ‘longer so we could get to even more discussion’. Because the times for meeting are based upon student availability, I have since created an on-line discussion option complete with downloadable files and resources; additionally, the WITs access our electronic listserve for messages and celebratory statements.

Another individual shared a concern that ‘some people tend to talk more than others’. I, too, would characterise the WITs’ conversations in this way, but less so recently because of the continual efforts made by the more experienced WITs and group leaders to invite all individuals into every discussion. Inevitably, there will be differences in communication styles: ‘Who speaks’ and ‘about what and when’ is a pedagogical concern for many educators.

The WIT manager uses the agenda developed for each group meeting as a means to keep ‘time tabs’ on the items to be discussed. This way, every presenter can count on time for sharing. Those interviewed offered advice to the faculty mentor for continuing with facilitative group dynamics.

1. Persist with the expectation that students will produce according to their timelines.
2. Continue fostering the group through student-centred inquiry, scheduling and leadership.
3. Carry on critiquing everyone’s scholarly writing activity in a supportive peer context.
4. Persevere in negotiating the college’s ‘red tape that is time-consuming and taxing’.

Subsequent to the study, the WIT manager wrote reflectively about the interview process itself, to help shed light on the understated nature of the criticism received [5]. A detailed letter was provided, which explicates and verifies the interpretations made earlier. Highlights follow from the student’s response.

I believe there was ample prompting for ‘criticism’ and negative feedback during the interviews. Students were asked for things that ‘need to be improved’ or do not ‘work’. At every interview I stressed that the sharing would be anonymous and that the WITs should not hesitate to be perfectly honest. Given this assurance, I don’t believe anyone would have hesitated to speak out. In our group, ‘criticisms’ are brought out into the open. So there was probably little ‘complaint’ expressed in the interviews for at least two reasons: (1) you are experienced at developing cohorts and adjusting their dynamics, and (2) authors and discussants partake in deep critical discussion.

Results from this case study suggest that dissertation writers benefit from cohort mentoring that provides motivation and support as well as an agency for facilitating and improving the doctoral culture.

Because the WIT students have a stake in ensuring that our organisational efforts are sustained, it is my hope that this inquiry has inspired greater conscientiousness. The WIT cohort appears to have offered sanctuary while productively enabling socialisation towards an envisioned end. Statements from some of the interviewees hinted at a deepening commitment to such organisational goals; these reflections were welcome by-products of a study focused less on individual behaviour and responsibility and more on group processes and outcomes. Subsequent to the interviews, attendance has become more consistent.

Implications for Doctoral Education

Socialisation is enhanced when students share academically while developing cultural knowledge that assists with the growth of new scholars (Chao et al., 1994). Importantly, a sense of relief was reported by participating cohort members for not having to ‘fly solo’ in their doctoral studies. Previously, as faculty in another part of the USA, I was assigned by the administration to teach courses to a formal doctoral cohort. Students and faculty were artificially brought together; the sharing of knowledge and the scope of peer mentorship was limited to the entry level. In contrast, informal cohort structures offer greater latitude for creative thinking. In the WIT cohort, those who are programmatically ahead provide focus and direction.
Just as flexibility and freedom from institutional constraints are welcoming advantages of the informal mentoring cohort, serious drawbacks result from this very lack of bureaucratic support. The reward structure in HE does not typically recognise efforts that exceed teaching/advising loads. Students expect to be guided during the summer months on their dissertations, yet US faculty typically have only 9 month contracts. Incentives (e.g. merit pay, teaching awards and reassignment based on equivalency loads) that compensate for the ongoing investment of time should be built into faculty workloads. These recommendations extend Dinham & Scott’s (2001) policy suggestions for mandating institutions to support the scholarly goals of doctoral students and the future generation.

Another point is that the informal cohort model probably has a better chance of thriving where structured elements have been integrated. Without the scaffolds that were built into the WIT cohort from the outset, it would have disintegrated. Cohort studies emphasise that the faculty–student support model should be implemented more vigorously. Students need help staying on target and growing with their peers, and faculty may find it enriching and efficient to work collaboratively with groups. These benefits alone could enhance the quality of doctoral education and so their value should not be underestimated.

Neither the formal nor the informal cohort model presents the answer to student development and doctoral reform, however. Existing networks need to be evaluated for insight into processes and outcomes. Context and further study can help determine the most productive form that any group can take.

Notes

[1] Each student came with a story and a major problem that needed attention, with situations ranging from delays in admission to the programme (after having completed coursework) to ineffectual mentoring.

[2] Worth noting, the cohort meetings have not replaced my one-on-one sessions with students, needed for providing personalised help as well as resolving questions and pertinent issues that arise.

[3] The reflective activity surveys covered, in addition to basic demographics and dissertation goals, experiences of mentorship in HE.

[4] Ten doctoral students were not included in this study because they were new to the WIT cohort.

[5] This methodological strategy was used in response to a reviewer’s request for expanded critical reflection on the group dynamics that led to little complaint.

References


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