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# Catalyst: A Peer Mentoring Model Supporting New Academics

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experiences of a group of new academics from different disciplines in a research-intensive university, involved in a pilot peer-mentoring programme known as Catalyst. The critical function of this programme, as reflected by the name, was to speed up their introduction to the university and make the transition into their departments smoother, with the knowledge and support that new academics require when beginning academia. The model consists of weaving one-to-one peer mentoring simultaneously with one-to-many peer mentoring, a synergy which provided continuous, sustainable, economical and easily implemented support. The two types of peer mentoring became interdependent, which generated sustainability. The paper discusses details of the model and the benefits gained by the new academics through their involvement over their initial semester. As a result, the isolation many felt as they began their new academic roles was reduced, and they were able to cope with the institution and departmental expectations more quickly and effectively than left on their own.

**Keywords:** early-career academics; peer mentoring; support, community of practice; mentoring

## Introduction

> *I feel quite isolated here … being newish to the university ... what I needed was someone I could actually bounce stuff off. (New academic)*

"I feel quite isolated here" are words often heard in my position as an academic developer from early-career academics new to the University of Auckland. Although many institutions offer introductory programmes to induct new academics (Staniforth & Harland, 2006), most are quite short and occur soon after arrival. At the University of Auckland, this is also the case, and those that attend receive a broad overview on how the University operates, what is available, and a brief introduction to the fundamentals of teaching. But, returning to their faculties, new academics frequently report back to us that some departments are not providing enough, indeed any, support and many are unsure of what is expected of them in their new role. Left unchecked, the excitement of the new position can become rapidly lost to feelings of abandonment and loneliness, which can then lead to insecurities and doubts about the academic position they chose (Archer, 2008; Gourlay, 2011).

In the Centre for Learning and Research at the University of Auckland, my colleagues were becoming increasingly aware of the urgency for support amongst new academics in their beginning months. Mentoring was considered, as the literature is prolific on the merits, but we were mindful that "mentoring relationships are not always positive and sometimes manifest a dark and dysfunctional side" (Lunsford, Baker, Griffin, & Johnson, 2013, p. 1) where mentoring, if it occurs, is obscure and the relationship malfunctional and "whether they succeed or fail often falls on the abilities of the people who volunteer or are chosen to fulfil the mentoring role" (Woodd, 2001, p. 97). Although aware of the downside of mentoring, the positive features prevailed, and we were keen to find a way which would be relevant and sustainable for academics new to the University. At the time, our centre was short-staffed, and we did not have the resources to find and train mentors, so our aim was to find a strategy which could be easily set up and conceivably manageable by one person.

The impetus to select peer mentoring and pilot this for feasibility arose out of a study about immigrant mathematics teachers working in low socio-economic secondary schools, part of a project that I (the author) had been involved in (Kensington-Miller, 2007). The particular study describes a group of teachers new to New Zealand and struggling to cope with a myriad of issues, including working with an unfamiliar curriculum and assessment regime, and the challenge of being expected to adapt their teaching styles to accommodate the diversity of students. In their schools, they were all the sole teacher of a final year mathematics class, and although situated in departments, they had no one to work with at this level or to talk to about difficulties. The details of this study are not relevant here; however, the isolation those participants felt and the lack of outside support and professional development to induct them into their new positions had strong similarities to what the new academics were experiencing at the University of Auckland. The teachers in this study were paired up according to the curriculum levels they were teaching at, and they spent time

working through issues related to their courses. Meeting regularly in pairs and each month as a whole group meant that over time, camaraderie developed and with it trust and much needed support.

It was decided by our centre to pilot the peer mentoring model used in this previous study, adapting it to the university context. The model, which later inherited the name Catalyst, consisted of two aspects operating simultaneously: one-to-one peer mentoring, in which the academics mentored each other, combined with one-to-many peer mentoring, in which a more experienced academic mentored them as a group. The structure was relatively easy and quick to set up, with the primary aim to provide practical support and mentoring for the new academics through their initial months. The purpose, therefore, of this article is modest; to demonstrate the usefulness of offering the peer mentoring model known as Catalyst into the introductory programme for new academics.

This paper begins by outlining the development of the Catalyst model, which was trialled in a case study with 10 new academics. The background on why support is necessary for early-career academics is first summarised, and the literature that shaped the rationale for the Catalyst model follows. The findings are presented, and the potential benefits and feasibility of the model are then discussed.

## The need to support early-career academics

Early-career academics usually enter the university with fresh ideas and enthusiasm, but, as with any job, there is often some initial trepidation and anxiety of what is required (Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006; Staniforth & Harland, 2006; Trowler & Knight, 2000). The reality of meeting expectations, and knowing that they must stack up when measured and evaluated for tenure, and later, promotions, can seem challenging for new academics as they try to orientate (Hemmings & Kay, 2010; Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006). Archer (2008) argues that the path of becoming an academic is “not smooth, straightforward, linear or automatic, and can involve conflict and instances of inauthenticity, marginalisation and exclusion” (p. 387). Although most academics have been mentored through doctoral supervision, the transition into their first academic job can still be daunting, requiring new learning of what is expected, difficult (Gourlay, 2011). Accordingly, many new academics may feel very alone, particularly for those commencing in a new city or country.

For most, the role of the new academic will encompass a variety of tasks, some of which they may not have been exposed to while doing their doctorate. This might include conducting new research, fund-raising, publishing in books and professional journals, conferences, networking, teaching, and service within the university and community (Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006). These tasks all demand time – especially learning how to prioritise, and support is therefore crucial (Hemmings & Kay, 2010). The reality of the job can often be overwhelming, and new academics “are increasingly required to objectively ‘count’ teaching hours ... as though higher numbers have impacts upon ‘quality’” (Nagy & Burch, 2009, p. 232).

Learning how to negotiate the apparently democratic but actually hierarchical structure of academia is challenging for new academics. It is hard for them to tell where the boundaries are, whereas for doctoral students, these were more closely defined. Knowing how to talk to other academics when they have typically been a student is for many a difficult transition. The complex social system of academia does not commonly allow for support in helping new academics orientate themselves and get the knowledge they need.

Lack of support amongst early-career academics is a systemic problem (Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006; Staniforth & Harland, 2006). A study by Sutherland and Petersen (2009) across two New Zealand tertiary institutions found new academics experiencing “a lack of mentoring from senior colleagues, an apathetic Head of Department, poor or non-existent advice about promotions and career planning, and induction processes that lack specificity and timeliness” (p. 3). Such examples were preventing early-career academics from having “research success; collegiality or academic citizenship; and personal satisfaction and balance” (p. 6). This is the personal effect; there are also costs to departments and institutions when academics take longer to settle in so that they are able to contribute to their full potential. What is needed, we were hearing, was more ‘backroom talk’, the conversations and questions where new academics could talk freely about the complexity of juggling all the demands of the job.

Another study involving three universities in Israel examined the effect of occupational insecurity and role stress on academic performance and excellence of pre-tenure academics (Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006). Prior to tenure, increasing stress about occupational uncertainty was found to result in early-career academics making compromises at the expense of originality in order to increase productivity. With the intention of assisting pre-tenure staff to plan their future productively and reduce stress, these authors propose mentoring combined with annual assessment processes. Again, there are individual and institutional benefits to ensuring new academics find the way to fulfil their highest potential through significant contribution to teaching and research.

In the United Kingdom, Staniforth and Harland (2006) investigated the role of heads of department and found that these positions were pivotal in “protecting new staff from excessive workloads” (p. 194). The role for new staff was often subsequently regarded as complex and hidden, or even indirect – new staff became dependent on heads and unable to be self-directing. Similar to the previous examples, Staniforth and Harland recommend mentoring as a way to give back to new academics some control of their own adjustment.

## How the Catalyst model developed

The studies in mentoring are prolific, and in education they are commonly centred on pre-service and beginning teachers, or students (Allen, Russell, & Maetzke, 1997; Chan, 2008; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Darwin & Palmer, 2009), with the merits well documented. There are, however, concerns, as traditional mentoring is not always easy to access (Darwin & Palmer, 2009); finding sufficient as well as suitable mentors can be a struggle; a lack of time to meet with a mentor is often problematic (Ehrich, Tennent, & Hansford, 2004); poor planning and a lack of understanding of the mentoring process can arise; matching of mentors and protégés can be unsuccessful; there is often a lack of access to mentors from minority groups (Ewing et al., 2008); and more. The challenge of implementing a traditional mentoring programme and training both mentors and protégés, together with the expense of money and time, can therefore be prohibitive. Added to this, traditional mentoring can promote a hierarchical power relationship which can reinforce feelings of loneliness and professional self-doubt (Darwin, 2000; Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister, 2009).

One adaptation of the traditional mentoring relationship is one-to-one peer mentoring, where the partners can be in comparable positions and levels. Some variations include peer coaching, where both participants are the same age and level, but where one partner is more experienced, providing the skill and expertise (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990); co-mentoring, where both participants mentor each other and both work on the same specific agenda (Diamond, 2010; Jaworski & Watson, 1994; Lick, 1999); or having a critical friend, where two colleagues help each other develop through a chosen method of reflection (Cooney & Krainer, 1996; Farrell, 2001; Saunders & Pettinger, 1995). A peer mentoring approach provides an opportunity for open, non-hierarchical dialogue, as partners can provide as well as receive support, encouragement and motivation. In this way, the exchange of ideas on issues of survival are more likely to occur than in a traditional mentoring relationship, and the anxiety that many have is reduced (Harnish & Wild, 1994; Webb, Wangmo, Ewen, Teaster, & Hatch, 2009).

A further variation of mentoring discussed by Darwin and Palmer (2009) involves group meetings or mentoring circles, based on the notion from Kram (2004) that when participants collectively meet together on a regular basis to share and work, there are many benefits: closer and richer relationships grow, learning occurs, and support develops. Darwin and Palmer reason that a collaborative atmosphere enables members "to discuss real issues relating to work, career and family with like-minded people .... the greatest benefits coming from interacting with others and sharing experiences" (p. 134).

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), having a shared practice generates the collective knowledge that participants have. Wenger (1998) further claims that identities become anchored in each other as people work together and that learning occurs through participating "in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). In this sense, personal and professional identities become bound together and strengthened by belonging to a group of people they know well.

Nagy and Burch (2009) discuss the changing university environment and how academics are encouraged to be autonomous and accountable, thereby diminishing both availability and willingness to engage in collegiality. They contend that universities should provide a contemporary context with opportunity to reconnect academics in communal engagement without coercion. However, Gourlay (2011) argues that when novice lecturers transition to new roles, they experience confusion, inauthenticity and isolation, and the suggestion by their departments that they should feel part of a 'community' is a myth for them. Gourlay further argues that this "'community' should not be assumed to pre-exist in an academic department" (p. 76) and that, in general, faculty practices were found not to be shared. She recommends "greater involvement of experienced academics from within the discipline, such as via mentoring or shadowing processes" (p. 76) and broadening the focus beyond just teaching and learning. She also suggests more structured support regarding academic writing and how to start new research.

According to the literature, by spending time together sharing information, pondering common issues and exploring ideas, knowledge accumulates, needs are met and in many cases a community of practice will form (Jawitz, 2007, 2009; Nagy & Burch, 2009). When this happens, Wenger (1998) maintains that individuals' social identities become forged and tied up with this community of practice, as they are built on a common purpose, with shared norms and practices, binding the group together. Driscoll et al. (2009) say that this will take time, as when academics from different disciplines meet together, the physical, behavioural, cultural and professional differences are strong, but it takes time for these to change. They reason that as collaboration and experiences are shared, a commonality of intellectual purpose, feeling, experience and resolve takes over so that feelings of isolation and professional self-doubt diminish. In turn, this provides incentives which can be linked to career advancement, accelerated productivity, personal satisfaction and growth (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Ehrich et al., 2004).

## The Catalyst model: setting it up

The model for this case study was created using a combination of two approaches: one-to-one peer mentoring and one-to-many (or group) peer mentoring. The aim was to gain maximum benefit from working together in pairs and as a whole group, developed from the theory behind these. In pairs, the new academics would mentor each other, building on the knowledge or expertise, however small, that each had. In a large group, they would be mentored by a more experienced academic and would work collaboratively, enabling knowledge to grow further.

## Participants

The participants in this study had just completed a three-day introductory programme to the University and were part of a group of twenty-five new academics. Ten volunteered to take part (seven women, three men) in a pilot peer mentoring programme to run for a four-month period over the subsequent semester. They ranged in discipline: Nursing, Education, Optometry, Mathematics, Sociology, Computer Science, Property, Psychology, Business and Population Health. The other fifteen participants chose not to participate for various reasons such as timetabling difficulties with the group meetings; they were located at other campuses and felt that travel would take up too much time; they were already being mentored; and some were new academics to this university but not beginning academics and therefore felt they did not need the Catalyst programme.

## Method

The participants attended six two-hour group meetings, every two weeks throughout the semester, at a central location, with refreshments provided. Prior to the first meeting, the participants were matched using a simple questionnaire, which detailed their position and department, and established whether they were new to New Zealand, whether they were parents, and what languages they spoke. The pairs were matched according to personal similarities as much as possible, from different departments, and were announced at the first meeting.

At each meeting the group were mentored by the author on institutional expectations of academic life and how to be more productive and strategic in their jobs. The topics for the six meetings included:

- Balancing the roles of being an academic, which included SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) goals and work/life balance goals (Boice, 1991; Gray, 2005). A discussion on the nexus between teaching, research and service with mentoring on how to integrate these three areas effectively into practice.
- Academic Performance Reviews and Continuation (similar to tenure) reports were explained and mentoring given on how to prepare for these, the standards expected, gathering evidence, and how to write strong applications.
- Promotion and how to achieve this at the required time. Mentoring on preparing for promotion from the beginning of the academic career followed by effective ways of documenting teaching, research and service.
- Habits of highly effective academics – this included mentoring about research productivity and integrating writing into everyday practice; how to keep the writing flowing easily; and how to get past writer's block if it occurs.
- Teaching in the lecture theatre – this involved effective ways for teaching small groups or large lectures, undergraduate and postgraduate. The session included practicing in front of the group, with feedback on voice projection, presentation and more.
- Where to from here – this session involved extensive mapping out of the next five years for the new academic and where each participant would like to be in their career.

As well as being mentored as a group every two weeks, the pairs met for one-to-one peer mentoring at least once during the in-between weeks. These one-to-one sessions were structured for each pair to work through tasks (given out at the group meetings) to help with the mentoring process.

## Data collection

Ethics consent was obtained to evaluate the programme. Data were collected from post-programme interviews with each new academic and a focus group interview, together with journal notes the author made reflecting after each session. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Implicit in the interview process was the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the new academic. In this way, semi-structured interviews allowed a point of interest to be explored in more detail (Hollway & Jefferson, 2002), so that if there were factors that were overlooked, they would surface. An independent researcher carried out the interviews, rather than the author who facilitated the workshops, to avoid bias.

## Data analysis

The data collected from the interview transcripts and the journal notes from the author were analysed using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to identify and classify recurring concepts. This involved an initial phase of familiarisation with the data, achieved through multiple readings and compared and revised with an independent researcher for consensus to ensure that possible bias was avoided.

## The Catalyst model: the results

The group of new academics came together every two weeks, for a two-hour session. Having a small group of 10 participants meant there was time for everyone to have turns interacting as well as time for other activities. The group were often rowdy and animated as they shared together, enjoying the initial time when they met to 'unwind' and talk about their work and how they were coping. One participant commented:

> *I feel I'm on the border so it is nice to have that contact with a bigger group. It makes you feel you're part of something and that you're all about the same. It's different from going somewhere else where you're the new person and everyone else has been there for yonks. I enjoyed it.*

Overall, the meetings were an opportunity to be part of a bigger group to share stories and be encouraged by their colleagues from other departments going through similar situations. They were also a time to be mentored about the different aspects of the job and to gain more institutional knowledge, which would progress them more quickly than if they had been left on their own. Over the semester, the group became very close and the comradeship that developed was evident.

The group were required to meet in pairs at least once between the group meetings to mentor each other. One pair tried to meet online to save time but discovered this medium was slow and felt too formal. Most pairs chose to meet at a local café, being neutral territory, as they felt they could let their 'guards' down and not be worried about who might be listening. Often, the conversations were what one participant described as 'backroom talk', meaning they would ask questions such as "What am I going to do about this?" or "Where do I find that?" They felt they should probably know the answers but might have forgotten or not really understood and would be too embarrassed to ask senior colleagues to explain again or, in some cases, they felt disapproval for being so needy.

At each meeting, the pairs would spend time recapping on their previous two weeks, discussing what went well and what didn't, and often touching on their personal lives, as it usually affected their work–life balance. They would also work on tasks given out at the group meetings, related to the particular topic of that week. These provided a focus and a structure, but more importantly a legitimate reason to meet, as otherwise they felt they might not be so motivated, being time away from their busy schedules. Over these initial months, the value of having another new academic they could trust, to talk about things that went well or not so well, the 'backroom talk', was noteworthy, and professional friendships grew notably strong.

The group felt that having a peer mentor, from a different department or faculty, and at a similar academic level, to meet with on a regular one-to-one basis gave an immediate feeling of belonging. They said it made them feel "part of the university structure, as we're all about the same, all newish to the university". They explained:

> *In a strange sort of way we had similar roles and even though our titles and departments were quite different, there were lots of similarities when we started to dig down. We were able to encourage each other, exchange ideas and develop together.*

One new academic described having a colleague to meet with for coffee made her feel important, as she had no one else to do this simple activity with. Although the group described getting to know each other socially and having a "new friend" was enjoyable, the most valuable benefit, they said, was having an academic at the same stage, organised from the start, to work on tasks related to the job and be a mentor. This, they said, allowed them to be more open about issues, as meeting frequently developed trust quickly. Working with someone in a different department was important as:

> *If you're talking, you're probably talking about your job and someone nearby, you know, could hear what you're saying and so you would have to be careful about what you say and what is heard. You don't want to say the wrong thing.*

Having nine other academics to contact in the initial months made the transition into the job easier and faster, as it meant there was always someone available to contact if there was an issue to resolve or some information required:

> *If you have built up trust you can make contact and say, you know, I've got a problem, or can I run something past you, that kind of thing.*

Additionally, the different perspectives and experiences each new academic brought with them contributed to their knowledge and provided them with alternative solutions if needed:

> *My knowledge was different being from a different discipline and so I felt I could offer other ideas about how to deal with things. I felt I could give a different perspective.*

In all, the one-to-one peer mentoring provided comradeship, feedback, accountability, encouragement and support as well as the opportunity to reflect with another academic and receive feedback. The one-to-one relationship was mutually beneficial, personally and professionally, as highlighted by one new academic:

> *It gave me permission to ask things whereas normally I probably would have just carried on working, trying to figure it out myself. I didn't have to worry whether it was a silly question.*

Working across the University with nine other new academics gave the group a broader institutional knowledge and a glimpse of how different departments worked compared to their own. The overriding benefit, however, was just simply having a colleague from another discipline that they could talk to confidentially about anything related to the job and receive advice and guidance in return. It is, however, recognised that the participants who were involved in this pilot had all volunteered to take part. As such, they were all eager to be included and were cooperative, which impacts on the results. Adopting the programme for ALL new academics would be difficult because of the various reasons from those who did not take up the offer (see above). Voluntary participation brings with it intrinsic motivation, buy-in and accountability as discussed in the following section.

## The benefits of the Catalyst model

The Catalyst model was created from combining one-to-one peer mentoring with one-to-many (or group) peer mentoring. The critical function was to speed up the introduction (as reflected in the name) for a group of new academics, with the knowledge and support they required to get established and productive quickly in their new jobs. The model provided space for the group away from their departments to work together collaboratively, learning about institutional and departmental expectations, as well as a place to discuss difficult issues that may have arisen for them (Webb et al., 2009). They capitalised on the knowledge and expertise of individual members providing a diversity of experience by sharing stories and celebrating successes, supporting Lave and Wenger's (1991) claim that shared practice generates collective knowledge. This was further amplified with the knowledge and expertise of the group mentor providing leadership, guidance and advice. And, consistent with Wenger (1998), their professional identities grew through participation and engagement.

The group meetings, held once a fortnight, were too infrequent to be sustainable on their own without the addition of the one-to-one meetings. Allocating more meetings was too difficult to timetable everyone attending, and the one-to-one meetings resolved this by providing the continuity. These were a time to work with a colleague more closely, someone they could discuss job-related issues or concerns when they arose, rather than waiting until the next meeting. As a result, the group developed caring and strong friendships in a short time, despite the enormous differences between individuals, disciplines and their views. This created opportunities for each member to reflect on different ways of working and thinking about their academic role. While Driscoll et al. (2009) suggest that any benefit from this will take time, as building a commonality of purpose with academics from different disciplines with so many differences is not straightforward, the continuity between the two strategies in this model mitigated this.

The camaraderie which developed over the semester created a strong network of professional colleagues, and the group talked about how their feelings of isolation and self-doubt decreased. Being in similar positions made it easier for them to understand each other's challenges, which Gourlay (2011) argues are inherent with faculty practices. They offered advice and encouragement to each other as a group, reinforced with their one-to-one meetings. They discussed and worked through the different institutional and departmental expectations they were hearing about, which resulted in a smoother transition than had they been left alone. Their level of connectedness and engagement in the University context increased, which led to better autonomy for each and a better sense of who they were professionally (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Kram, 2004; Nagy & Burch, 2009).

Although each variation of peer mentoring is a legitimate mentoring model capable of 'standing alone' on its own merit, the evidence in this study supports combining the two variations together and working concurrently. The networks which were formed, the camaraderie that grew and the knowledge from the group and the group mentor were invaluable, but more particularly the continuity from combining the two variations was instrumental in keeping the group connected. As such, the study was a pilot exercise, and further research with different arrangements is currently under way.

## Final words

The pilot study presented tangible benefits and feasibility of incorporating a model of one-to-one and one-to-many (or group) peer mentoring for new academics, in order to transition more smoothly and quickly into academia than if they were left alone. The 'catalyst' model was sustainable for the semester, as the two types of peer mentoring operating concurrently provided continuity. This synergy offered frequent assistance, institutional knowledge, and guidance during the beginning months of the job, during which, according to Driscoll et al. (2009), if new academics are left in isolation without encouragement and support, they will not be productive as quickly as those who receive these. Although the benefits of the model are not directly measurable in the short-term, it is arguable that new academics who are provided with support and guidance would not benefit.

The study draws attention to the potential for new academics who are in different departments being part of a community of similar academics. In this study, the group met together for one semester to be inducted into university life; however, the time period will vary depending on the purpose of the group. Although the aim in this study was to speed up the introduction to the university for new academics, the sense of belonging was very powerful, a factor which Darwin and Palmer (2009) discuss. While belonging is difficult to quantify, the awareness of group dynamics is unquestionably a factor worth considering for developing stronger groups.

In practical terms, the peer mentoring model was easily established, economical and sustainable, with the potential to be generalisable to other fields. There is much scope for the model to evolve into other areas where groups require support. One example of this, currently being researched, is a group of early-career academics developing their research.

### Biography

*Barbara Kensington-Miller* is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at The University of Auckland. Her research interests are around supporting early-career academics, in particular the role of peer mentoring for supporting new academics, and the issues in academic identity relating to institutional context. Her research also extends into the scholarship of teaching and learning in undergraduate subjects.

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