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Navigating the lonely sea: peer mentoring and collaboration among aspiring women scholars

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A group of pre-tenured female faculty members is shown to advance from professionally isolated individuals to a collaborative group of writers through the peer mentoring process. The autoethnographically based approach to the analysis of self-narratives exploring this transformation revealed experiential, emotional and developmental commonalities that guided the women's navigation of the tenure track at a large public research university via understanding of self, others and the environment. In contrast, the women's prior experiences with the traditional dyadic approach to mentoring resulted in feelings of isolation, professional self-doubt and questioning of purpose. The researchers suggest that peer mentoring among female faculty in a higher education context offers an effective mentoring approach toward supporting women in forging scholarly identity.

Keywords: feminism; mentoring; professional identity; professional socialization; scholarly development

In recent years, university leadership has instituted formal mentoring programs as a way to help junior women and minority faculty attain tenured faculty status (Kosoko-Lasaki, Sonnino, & Voytko, 2006; McCormack & West, 2006; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). Accounts of pre-tenured faculty experiences (Cawyer, Simonds, & Davis, 2002; Mullen & Forbes, 2000; Spall & Norum, 2002) suggest that, among beginning faculty members, professional identity formation is primarily driven by an intellectual and emotional socialization into a dominant academy culture. Wenger (1998, 2000) proposed that developing a strong sense of professional identity goes deeper than affiliating oneself with or adapting to an organization. The attainment of a scholarly identity and with it the conferral of tenure, can be described as a 'learning trajectory' that extends through time and multiple communities of the academy (Wenger, 1998, p. 74).

Traditional one-to-one mentoring approaches follow a dyadic model of mentor and protégé, which many researchers argue promotes a hierarchical power relationship between the mentor and protégé (e.g., Darwin, 2000; Hansman, 2003; McCormack & West, 2006). Such hierarchical power relationships may develop unintentionally; namely, when the mentor is a member of the dominant university paradigm and the protégé is a member of a non-dominant group such as a woman or minority. Unsuccessful dyadic mentoring can engender feelings of loneliness and professional self-doubt and a devaluation of purpose among beginning women faculty. Peer mentoring, in which two or more individuals enter into a coequal relationship that

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supports mutual mentoring for career and psychosocial validation, may be an alternative (Mullen, 2005). The landmark feminist model introduced by Fassinger (1997) pioneered the equalization of power differentials. The model emphasized the socio-emotional aspect of mentorship. Alternative approaches to mentoring have been attempted, including those that feature women exclusively mentoring women as advanced by Kalbfleisch and Keyton (1995). These mentoring models incorporate feminist principles of equal balances of power among participants into peer mentoring frameworks that value emotive expression, an ethic of care as a source of knowledge (Reger, 2001) and the integration of work and home lives (Chandler, 1996; Chesney-Lind, Okamoto, & Irwin, 2006; McGuire & Reger, 2003). Extension of these tenets to relevant cross-race feminist mentoring (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Mullen, 2005; Mullen & Fish, 2009) would increase sensitivity to marginalized groups. Such mentoring approaches incorporate strengths from both feminism and peer mentoring, neither of which do not call on fitting the women (National Science Foundation, 2008) into the existing institutional culture and which conceptualize mentoring as learning, perhaps along an individual trajectory (Wenger, 1998). Use of these mentoring approaches has the potential to support women in forging their own identity in their progression toward earning tenure.

This article explores the transformative journey of the authors, five pre-tenured women faculty who participated in a peer mentoring group. The article chronicles the group's transformation from isolated individuals to a collaborative group of writers. Through this transformative process, the women became independent scholars with an understood place within the larger context of the university setting; thus the women were more prepared to endeavor along the track to tenure. Through the development of a peer mentoring paradigm, the women were able to remove themselves from an exclusive dyadic mentoring paradigm, which only promoted feelings of isolation and professional self-doubt, to a place of understanding of self, others and the university environment (Vadeboncoeur, 1998).

Through an autoethnographically-based approach, we explored our lived and written narrated experiences, which documented our needs, struggles and successes as we sought validation by the prevailing culture and our eventual emergence into self-authorship and affirmation as individual scholars. Autoethnography places the self within the cultural context of the study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). According to Ellis and Bochner, autoethnographic texts are often written in the first person and are deeply personal and sensitive expressions of the authors' sense of being. Autoethnography is 'research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). This study is not an autoethnography in the purest sense of Ellis's definition; however, we used autoethnographic methods, whereby narratives, which were written in the first person, were used as the source of data in this study. The autoethnographically-based approach aided us in understanding the university environment – and thus our place within it – to help us become emerging, independent scholars in our fields. In narrating our process, this study weaves together the stages of our group's progress from one conceptual state to another: from mentorship to collaboration.

Mentorship of women and minorities in academia

Zellers, Howard, and Barcic (2008) synthesized a contemporary definition of mentoring as a relationship in which a mentor supports the 'professional and personal development

of another by sharing his or her experiences, influence or expertise' (p. 4). Mentoring in academic settings can be differentiated by whether it is implemented in the traditional one-to-one or dyadic format or in a group format. Dyadic mentoring occurs when a senior mentor is assigned to a single protégé on the basis of common interests or when a protégé selects the senior mentor from a group of individuals. This approach assumes a protégé's aspiration to emulate a mentor in some capacity. This form of mentoring may be successful for dyads that are highly compatible, and these formal mentoring programs can sometimes improve practice (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008) in university cultures that are already supportive of change in their hierarchical relationships (National Science Foundation, 2008).

However, this traditional mentoring approach may 'reinforce and reproduce a hierarchical power relationship' (McCormack & West, 2006, p. 410; see also Darwin, 2000) in settings that fail to recognize the tacit assumptions that bias, perhaps unintentionally, women's opportunities to participate and rights to advancement.

The facilitated group mentoring approach, in which one or more senior faculty facilitates interaction among a group of protégés rather than a single protégé provides an alternative that is not likely to reinforce and reproduce top-down power relationships (McCormack & West, 2006; Mullen, Cox, Boettcher & Adoe 2000). Power relationships may not develop because such an approach makes use of an equal balance of power, relationships and knowledge among many individuals (McCormack & West, 2006). Group mentoring programs to support women and minority faculty in their career goals include strategic collaboration (Wasburn, 2007) and triangular mentoring partnerships (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008).

Growing from the facilitated group mentoring model, mentoring practices with nonhierarchical forms have evolved, in which a dedicated facilitator is replaced with each member taking on that role such as in peer mentoring (Mullen, 2005). In this study, *peer mentoring* is defined as a specialized type of group mentoring in which each individual functions as both a mentor and a mentee to other individuals, emphasizing mutual interdependence among the members (Mullen, 2005).

Some peer mentoring groups have been exclusively female (National Science Foundation, 2008). As mentioned earlier, this mentoring form may incorporate feminist principles that support an equal balance of power among protégées, accept emotion as facilitating learning and value the integration of personal and work life support (McGuire & Reger, 2003). Peer mentorship, then, was the primary impetus for the formation of our group, which initially focused on encouraging and promoting individual writing projects.

Collaboration

Lattuca and Creamer (2005) defined collaboration as 'a social inquiry practice that promotes learning' (p. 7). In turn, learning is situated in the social practices that are embedded in an institution's body of practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Collaboration has been described as a way to 'combat loneliness and isolation' (Kochan & Mullen, 2003, p. 154) or as 'a means of expanding...knowledge or abilities, or as an avenue to compensate for weakness' (Kochan & Mullen, 2003, p. 154). Collaboration can also elicit a new understanding of one's environment and the people who inhabit it (Bateson, 2000; LeCompte, 2000).

Collaboration developed as we participated in the peer mentoring group and consequently, it emerged as an important framework in this study. The group developed

from a purely mentoring framework to a collaborative framework over time, in line with the four transitions involved in the process of developing collaboration elucidated by Creamer (2003): (a) dialogue, (b) familiarity, (c) collaborative consciousness and (d) examining differences. The framework of these transitions is used to synthesize the collection of self-reflective narratives that aided in the development of the women's sense of scholarly self-fulfillment.

Conceptual categories

Our interpretation of the synthesis of the narratives was informed by LeCompte's (2000) explication of constructing conceptual categories for qualitative data analysis, which Vadeboncoeur (1998) developed to apply to an academic setting. As Vadeboncoeur sought ways to help pre-service teachers understand themselves, she developed three themes: an understanding of (a) oneself, (b) other people and (c) one's environment.

Our autoethnographically-based approach was adapted to Vadeboncoeur's conceptual model. We allowed the data to speak, and as we organized each person's findings, three salient themes emerged: understanding of (a) ourselves as scholars; (b) our peers and their role in our development as scholars; and (c) the academic environment and our role in it. Through such a depth of understanding, our peer group-supported collaborative efforts enabled us to emerge from isolation and become self-supportive, tenure-track scholars within the wider university setting.

Our discussions led to the metaphor of navigating the lonely sea of tenure, reflecting Richardson's (1997) comment that 'metaphors exist at the conceptual level and prefigure judgments about the truth value of a text' (p. 44). We followed our metaphor as we sought to make sense of the journey our group had made from professional colleagues to collaborative friends, bound by scholarship and support.

Methods

Formation, composition and tasks of the peer mentoring group

As five aspiring women scholars, we participated in a workshop in January 2007 jointly sponsored by our university women's faculty organization and the Provost Office (see National Science Foundation, 2008). The group originally comprised six members, but the sixth member did not participate in our final collaborative efforts due to time constraints. Our peers were already prearranged for our peer mentoring group. We were members of three different departments in our university's School of Education: (a) Teaching and Learning, (b) Learning Sciences and Technologies and (c) Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. Most of us knew at least one other person in the group, whether well or peripherally.

The group displayed some variety in age and progression along the tenure track, with a 20+ year age gap between the two older women in the group and the youngest woman: the youngest member was 37 and the oldest member was 62. In addition, we were at different stages in the tenure process, with two women finishing their second year of the track, two women completing their fourth year of the tenure process and one woman in her fifth year of the tenure process. All the women were on track with at least two publications each year. Nonetheless, the concern of achieving tenure weighed equally heavy on all five women.

With the assistance of a tenured facilitator, we established goals and outlined our commitment to participating in a peer mentoring group. The facilitator functioned as a experienced faculty mentor who guided us through a peer mentoring context in which 'everyone in the group [was] a mentor and a mentee' (Clifford, 2003, para. 13).

After this initial meeting, the group met without the tenured facilitator. During our first solo peer mentoring meeting, we talked about the pressure that we felt as a group of women faculty facing an emphasis on publishing to attain tenure at a large public research institution. At that meeting, we established deadlines for achieving the three long-term goals and one short-term goal that were established at our first facilitated meeting. The long-term goals, which were related to achieving tenure, were to be met by May 15, 2007, and included the following:

- (a) write candidate statements (a document required from pre-tenured faculty at regular intervals) and have them reviewed by the group to clarify research agendas and connect them to teaching and service;
- (b) submit one manuscript to a journal for review;
- (c) complete one conference proposal; and
- (d) make progress on a second manuscript.

The short-term goal, which was meant to ensure individual accountability to the other peers, was to be met by February 10, 2007 and comprised one of the following:

- (a) complete and submit a manuscript for review;
- (b) submit a conference proposal; or
- (c) make significant progress on a manuscript for publication.

In addition to these stated goals, the group decided that two members would submit manuscripts for peer review at a meeting held every two weeks. These manuscripts were usually works that were near-final versions for submission to a journal in her field. The two authors receiving feedback during a given week usually emailed their manuscripts to the other women a few days before a meeting. We critiqued the content in a substantive manner, querying the author about points and conclusions that seemed not to be fully developed. We made verbal comments in a round-robin fashion about the authors' works, often referring to notes written by hand on the manuscripts. On occasion, the group offered encouragement and revision suggestions to peers whose work had been harshly criticized by senior scholars in their fields. Generally, the authors took notes about the feedback and offered explanations regarding the writing culture in their disciplines. After providing feedback about the writing, our conversation in these meetings moved naturally to discussions about achieving tenure and promotion, leadership in each respective department and various life or personal issues. Often, some or all of us lingered beyond the established end time to engage in active dialogue.

We continued to meet throughout the spring semester, and the meetings at the small campus restaurant gradually changed from the purely professional atmosphere of peer review to the more personal mode of collegiality and peer support. By the end of the spring semester, we started to relate to each other not only as colleagues, but also as companions navigating the often lonely waters that veil the overt and covert requirements for tenure.

The emergence of collaboration in the peer mentoring group

By the time the semester ended, one peer had drafted a proposal for a small professional development grant from the university's Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching (CEUT) to establish a formal faculty study group. Other peers added to and refined the proposal. Everyone agreed on the acronym WRITE, for 'Writing About Research to Inform Teaching and Engagement' because it summarized one of our group's goals and also fit our university's mission statement. The CEUT accepted our proposal and we received the grant. Before our group broke for summer break, we planned, during the following semester, to craft a final report that would describe our activities and satisfy the CEUT grant requirements.

Autoethnographic narratives

Fall semester arrived and the group reconvened to draft the CEUT report. After discussing possible approaches to the report, we decided to write narratives describing our experiences with the WRITE group. While discussing our experiences and making plans for this report, it became clear that it was necessary to describe more than a series of peer mentoring meetings.

Each of us wrote a reflective narrative about her experiences before and with the group. The five narratives each ranged from 400 words to 750 words. Our narratives were written in first person; the use of that voice made these data sensitive and personal for all of us. Each of us individually analyzed the collection of narratives to code and derive themes. At the start of the spring semester, we met to identify commonalities among our independent analyses. Eventually, in an iterative fashion, we developed a working consensus about some patterns arising from the themes.

We analyzed our narratives, regarding them as a rich source of data forming what Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined as an autoethnographic approach. Our work broadly reflected Ellis's description of autoethnography as a self-reflective narrative (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Our interpretation of the findings was informed by Vadeboncoeur's (1998) interpretation of LeCompte's (2000) explication of conceptual categories: understanding of (a) oneself, (b) other people and (c) one's environment. Three themes emerged from our synthesis and analysis of the autoethnographic narratives: understanding of (a) ourselves as scholars, (b) our peers and their role in our development as scholars and (c) the academic environment and our role in it.

Collaborative process

Creamer (2003) identified four transitions that provide a framework for our peer mentoring group's experience trying to synthesize a collection of self-reflective narratives and produce a collaborative product: (a) dialogue, (b) familiarity, (c) collaborative consciousness, and (d) examining differences. In the beginning stages of writing narratives and producing the present article, we dialogued about our narratives in a general sense. We emailed our narratives to each other, then read them and discussed them in face-to-face meetings. We discussed a range of possible methods for uncovering themes. We decided that each member would code and analyze the entire set of narratives and submit these analyses to the group for review. This process might be understood in two ways:

- (a) as an attempt by the group to understand the perspectives of individual members and learn from each member as a centerpiece of the collaborative enterprise; and
- (b) to use multiple interpretations as frames of reference for understanding our experiences and suspend the need to prematurely establish a dominant theoretical framework.

For us, the dialogue occurred during three meetings and through follow-up emails. Therefore open, non-hierarchical dialogue was a critical first step for our collaborative process.

According to Creamer (2003), familiarity occurs when collaborators achieve a better understanding about and fluidity with other members' concepts and projected frameworks. To the extent that these ideas are not complementary, competition may arise among group members as a result of differences in each person's perspective and agenda. This characteristic did occur in our peer mentoring group as we talked about writing this article; however, there was room to accommodate different perspectives in our group's type of collaborative writing. For example, we debated the initial nature of our inquiry. After much discussion, we came to one mutually satisfying conclusion, despite initial dissonance. In later discussions, it was evident that there was room to incorporate multiple conclusions, which enabled group members to accept and accommodate different viewpoints. Collaborative consciousness occurs late in the collaborative process; it happens when collaborators accept the language, interpretations and conclusions of another member as their own. Wasser and Bresler (1996) suggested that this phenomenon is the most critical point in collaboration because it signifies the point at which collaborators move from simple accommodation of other members' views to a group consensus – its collective consciousness. Through this stage, the positions and roles of group members shifted from an individual to a group worldview.

In her discussion of strategies that facilitate the movement from dialogue to collective consciousness, Creamer (2003) identified a technique for capturing evolving issues at meetings: she suggested enlisting a *memoist* to transcribe the discussion. In our writing group, when tape recording a meeting was not possible, one group member took notes. These memos provided recursive notes, which we used to reanalyze our dialogue and thinking. These notes allowed us to be gently confrontational with each other – and privately with ourselves – in both a recursive and a reflexive manner. Creamer (2003) suggested that this stage is essential for developing a true synthetic vision for a group.

The final and fourth stage in the collaborative process is when collaborators examine the differences in each other's points of view. Each of us went through this stage, but only after examining the final writing product and reflecting on it. When an individual has to make an immediate choice between meeting her own goals and commitments and meeting the goals and commitments of a group, determining whose priorities are deferred can create a challenging and competitive situation. We showed varying levels of commitment to the collective group goal of getting a paper ready for sending out to a journal within a deadline. There were a number of factors that impacted this varying commitment. For example, the repeated movement of commitments and deadlines over many months inevitably aligned better with some group members' schedules and outside commitments than with other members' schedules. In addition, the varied demands of teaching-advising, service, scholarship and

research that each of us faced in her home program and department required an ongoing dialogue and renegotiation of work and roles. Given the diversity of group members, their disciplines and their lived experiences at work, this shifting about, although uncomfortable at times, seemed inevitable to some degree.

Critical stages of collaboration emerge when people examine the differences in another person's point of view and ultimately appreciate difference as a way to learn about self, others and the collaborative process. Reflecting on the collaborative process, each of us realized that it may have been shortsighted to expect an equivalent level of commitment from all group members simultaneously throughout the process; rather, the collaborative style worked best when we were flexible and non-judgmental about participation and maintained ongoing communication and negotiation.

Results

During our analyses, we discovered that each of us had similar transformative experiences that corresponded to the conceptual categories described by Vadeboncoeur (1998): understanding of (a) ourselves as scholars; (b) our peers and their role in our development as scholars; and (c) the academic environment and our role in it. The commonalities in the peers' transformation experiences are illustrated in Figure 1.

Understanding ourselves as scholars

When we started meeting, each of us was assailed by a sense of unsettled identity and self-doubt. As one peer confided: '[I was] feeling deflated, anxious, and alone.' Some of us had received terse reviews from editors. We had all attended meetings held by Promotion and Tenure Committees, where senior faculty described the daunting task of achieving tenure. All of us had navigated through traumatic life events while trying to make the transition to the safe harbor of tenure. The work of understanding self beckoned each of us. Who was I? What was my purpose at this institution? Could I own the identity of writer-scholar? Could I believe that I might achieve tenure? The situation was clearly defined by one peer, who admitted: 'I was struggling ... I was in dire straits ... I was alone.'

At the beginning, we represented a group of individuals who had taken time from overly busy schedules to carve out a place in the academy. Having already spent time going it alone, each of us was ready to share the difficulty of navigating the murky waters of tenure that threatened to take us under and obscure our vision at every turn. One group member, who was a newly appointed faculty, summed up this feeling of isolation and confusion about where to find support:

When I heard about the Women's Peer Mentoring lunch last November, I signed up for it immediately because I had spent all of August through November in my office by myself with my computer. I started my position in August full of optimism; one usually has this after finishing ... doctoral work. I was feeling disillusioned and quite disheartened by November because the two mentors that I had been promised upon hire had not appeared. Who was I supposed to go to with personal or professional questions? I didn't want to bother senior faculty, as most young faculty feel, with crazy little questions. No one would talk about it openly and no one was knocking on my door – literally no one. I had one senior faculty member seek me out and stop by to say hi during my first five months, but he wasn't my mentor. The implications for this are severe for new faculty.

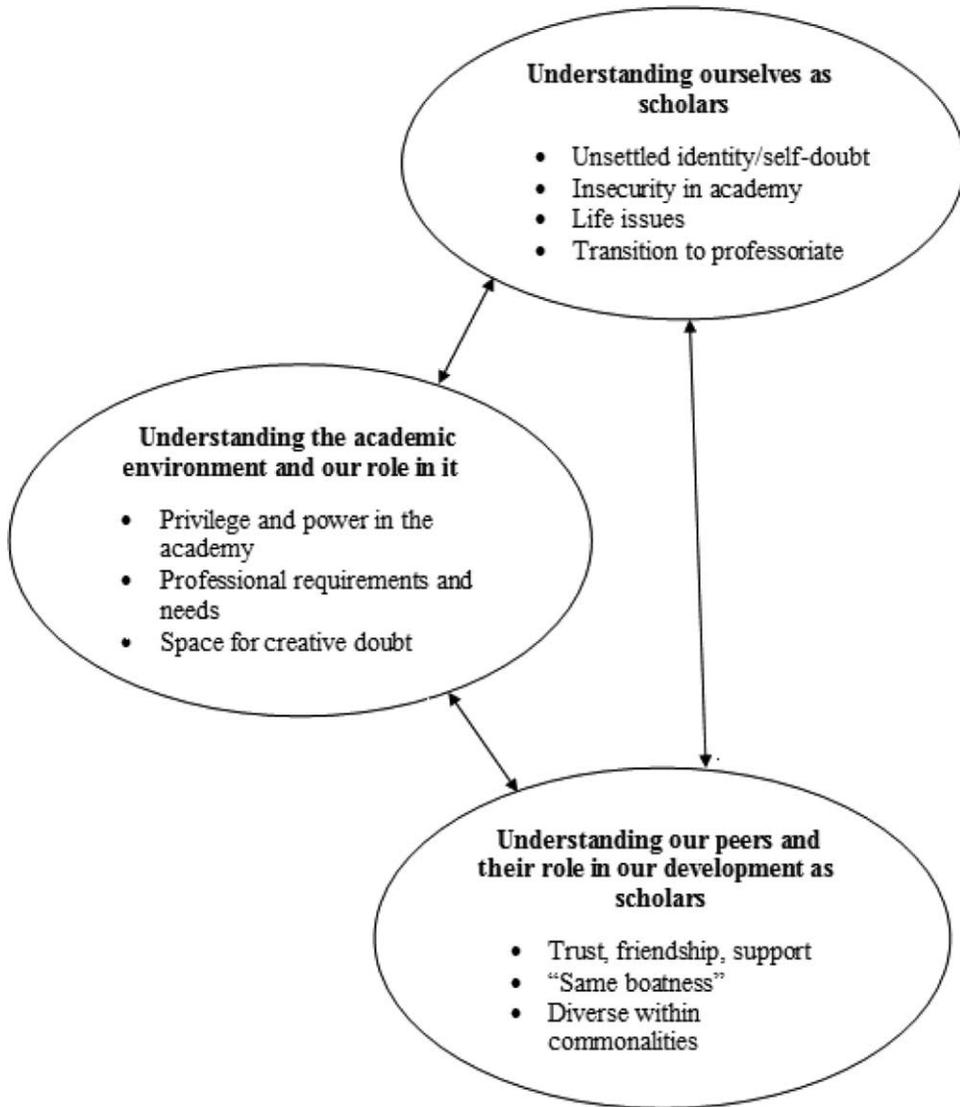


Figure 1. Transformational experiences of the peer mentoring group.

Perhaps more an artifact of each member’s disciplinary-based focus and compartmentalized mentor assignments, each woman was initially wary of creating a group with people from different disciplines in education. Expecting idiosyncratic differences to overshadow a propensity for productivity and research rigor, at first each member noted physical, behavioral, cultural and professional differences. Each of us was later surprised and reassured by a commonality of intellectual purpose, feeling, experience and resolve. This realization stimulated connections among the group’s members, intertwining with each member’s fears and hopes and holding them together ever so loosely in the beginning. The narrative of one member bears out this theme of the recognition of early superficial differences dissolving in light of shared experiences and goals:

As we sat around the table, eating soup, sandwiches, and pastries, drinking tea or coffee, our distinct taste in food reflected how distinct we all are in personality, age and physical appearance. However, the commonality that binds us together is the tenure goal. We are all very different women: racially, religiously, in our process of tenure, in our ages, and in our marital status. None of this has mattered.

Coming from different fields and subscribing to diverse conceptual frameworks, it seemed possible that we would have little in common professionally. Yet each of us took the business of peer review quite seriously, and the feedback was thorough in nature and kind in spirit. There was ‘no ripping of ideas to shreds’, and the feedback was delivered from multiple perspectives. As one peer offered her writing for review and received feedback, the peer mentoring she received offered a sense of identity and affirmed her ability to be a published scholar:

We didn’t plan to offer anything more than just writing advice initially, but then I learned that I could trust them with my writing – indeed, the article they reviewed was accepted for publication.

Insecurity was a dominant theme in the narratives. The need for a safe, trusting space to share, ask questions and get truthful answers was necessary for the peers. One peer remarked that the peer mentoring group ‘offered a safe and respectful place marked by encouragement and support’, while another peer stated that ‘there was a strong sense among ... us that we were in the muck together’ and ‘our unity could provide strength for survival’. Some of us who had been at the institution for longer periods and had endured some unprofessional behavior from other colleagues expressed defeatist sentiments, but being part of the group moved us into a more positive place. As one of us expressed in her narrative, she was able to tell herself, in triumph, ‘Get off the pity pot; there’s still time.’

All of us experienced, either before the first peer mentoring meeting or during the course of the meetings, traumatic life events that affected our scholarly productivity. These life events included the death and life-threatening illnesses of close loved ones, the loss of significant relationships, personal illnesses, several community traumas and so on. As one member confided:

The group has also provided impetus and support for me as I get back on track after an emotional time that was climaxed by [a significant community tragedy]. After a complete closedown of spirit, my reawakening has been fueled by our lunches.

Other activities crowding out time for scholarship were evident:

Classes show up on the calendar, meetings get written in, but even if scholarship gets scheduled to a particular day or days of the week, it can get squeezed out by more pressing issues.

This member saw the regularly scheduled peer mentoring group meetings as a way to counteract the tide by insisting on a sacred meeting time for scholarship. The group just made it easier to create this space.

As the group started, we were unsure of our roles in the peer mentoring group, much less in the male-dominated academy. However, through bi-weekly lunch meetings, each of us started to shape an identity as a writer-scholar and find her place as a contributing member of academe. We came to embrace the change (‘hungering for [an] outlet of productivity and collegiality’) that had thrown each of us into that precarious

role of tenure-track assistant professor. Nguyen (2007) stated that ‘change can cause fear, anxiety, or panic’, and while group members may not have moved into a state of ‘excitement, happiness, and exhilaration’ (p. 368), at least each of us has a better understanding of her position as an individual scholar, member of a peer writing group and university faculty member. Although each of us realizes that tenure and job security are linked to her own academic publishing record, each member has come to deal with ‘publish or perish’ with a greater sense of self-authority and self-determinism.

Understanding our peers and others and their role in our development as scholars

Understanding others involved developing affective values that included kindness, trust and confidence in other peer mentoring group members’ pursuits. We realized that we were all in the same boat as we continued to learn and grow as mentors, writer-scholars and collaborators. We developed a more purposeful sense of connectedness among ourselves, our institution and the academy. Bateson (2000) posits that:

there is a more subtle dynamic than similarity when groups withdraw from the majority and hang out together, and this is the pleasure of differing among themselves. It is true that social scientists can predict much of what each of us is likely to think or do from a set of descriptors – age, gender, class, ethnicity, and background – but there is a core that is distinctive and individual for every person. That core of individuality shines out when I am with others who are similar but not the same. Ironically, we seek out similarity to discover and celebrate uniqueness. (p. 8)

While struggling to find our place in the wider university, we found out more about ourselves in the process, including where we fit. As one member put it: ‘Since I feel more connected to this university now, largely due to these women, many of the other “being new” issues don’t seem so bad. At least there are people I can talk to about it!’ Another peer said:

I have depended on these women for advice in a personal sense and from a professional perspective. There are a myriad of confusing social rules in a new school, new university, and it helped to get feedback, stories, and sometimes a straight-out yes or no answer on some of these finer points.

We, as five women in this peer mentoring group, aspired to the common goal of achieving tenure and establishing successful careers in the academy, but each of us was an individual with a unique life story. We realized our individuality in a stronger sense than we thought possible when we were struggling alone to make sense of an environment that did not always feel accepting and affirming. As one member said: ‘I left each session feeling encouraged and revitalized, my own issues made much smaller and now in perspective. This stuff happens to everyone. It’s not just me. I can do this.’

To a greater extent, we have found our centers, our foci, our places in the university. Through our differences and similarities, we realize we are becoming scholars who have significant voices, and we have developed ways to make our voices heard. One peer observed:

Perhaps among the most rewarding to me is how the peer [mentoring] group has compelled us out of our offices, if only for brief periods of time, into a collaborative setting where we have opportunities to learn about and from one another and build on those connections.

Understanding the academic environment and our role in it

We found it difficult to understand the university environment (LeCompte, 2000). Although we were aware that professional requirements had to be met, and we were meeting them, most of us had the rigor of our research and scholarship questioned by a senior person in the field, which proved disruptive, rather than productive. Each peer had encountered the invisible walls and ceilings of the academy.

Devos and McLean (2000) identified the issues affecting women in the academy, several of which echoed concerns expressed by members of the group:

- (a) lack of access to mentors;
- (b) the male-dominated research cultures of universities;
- (c) difficulty balancing teaching, research, administration, personal commitments and establishing a research program in short-term contract jobs;
- (d) isolation and lack of support from colleagues; and
- (e) lack of confidence in themselves as researchers.

In terms of faculty mentors, one peer felt separated from her colleagues and bound to a productivity rhythm established by them: 'Every professor in my program had been tenured over two decades earlier ... and [I feel] captive to their timeline.' Some peers had assigned mentors but they did not receive much help or advice from these mentors. Some peers were satisfied with departmental mentoring. Others had self-appointed, grooming-type mentors whose mentoring became competitive over time. As one peer related: 'Hearing the ragged tales of my peers helped me to identify with and process my own fears and sense of inadequacies in trying to achieve tenure at a research institution.' Another peer said that she 'now feels I have some support here'.

Our university is changing the focus of its promotion and tenure process and we felt caught in the middle. We perceived that the university's historical roots and most prominent programs of study perpetuate promotion and tenure guidelines that value quantity over quality. Some group members had received advice from trusted colleagues, who told them to publish in quantity and disregard the advice of other colleagues who stressed only publishing in top-tier journals with a 15% acceptance rate – this type of publishing would occur after they became established as scholars. Therefore we came to the peer mentoring meetings with an eclectic and evolving mix of advice from mostly well-meaning colleagues that could be categorized as creative doubt. When discussing the various philosophies framing the promotion and tenure process, we were able to develop our own theory of authenticity to guide our scholarship and research within the context of the university's promotion and tenure requirements. This theory involved four principles:

- (a) be true to yourself and your beliefs;
- (b) do scholarship and research and write articles on subjects about which you feel impassioned;
- (c) find your own voice and write from the center of it; and
- (d) realize that your voice is an important one and have the self-confidence to submit your work.

One peer related: 'I began to feel that these women were giving me more than just critiques of my work. They were giving me ideas about how to teach better, communicate better, and be more confident in my job.'

As we discussed and shared experiences about our university experience, we started to understand the meaning of power and privilege in the academy. At the same time, we realized that we could develop a space for ourselves where our creative natures could thrive, and we could be productive members of the academy and productive people. As one peer said: ‘In very real ways, the peer group has spilled over into my teaching and advising practices and, I don’t doubt, will continue to do so.’

Discussion

This article has provided a description of the peer mentoring process and how our narratives blended to give voice to the vulnerability and loss of identity we felt as pre-tenured academic writers who ultimately experienced the reemergence and reclaiming of our self-identities as aspiring scholars. Through peer mentoring and the emergence of collaborative processes, the members of the group, so disparate in age and background, were able to overcome such differences. Bateson (2000), in her book *Full circles, overlapping lives*, talks about her daughter being born in a different country (whereas in fact they were both born in the United States 30 years apart) marking the way in which age can create cultural and social barriers. The situation in the writing group was similar, with the oldest member coming of age at the time Betty Friedan was starting the feminist movement in the 1960s, while the youngest member was not yet conceived. Group members had grown up in different eras, with different worldviews and in different geographic locations. As Bateson said in her interview with Brockman (2000):

Changes in the nature of authority, where the people in authority are of necessity continuing to learn ... [make] for a different kind of classroom, a different kind of campus, a different parent-child relationship. (para. 33)

The differences among ourselves, no matter how significant, did not prevent us from coming together to seek support and stability in an academic setting that is in transition from an insular, narrow culture to one that honors the importance of personal lives interwoven with professional scholarly careers. Individually, as part of the peer mentoring group, and as part of the collaborative WRITE group, we contributed to that ongoing transition, that redefinition of women in the academy.

Our development from peer mentors to collaborators may be best described as a social activity (see Lattuca & Creamer, 2005). We discovered that collaboration is more effective than having each person go off to do her part in isolation. Lattuca and Creamer (2005) emphasized that collaboration is situated in learning. This does not mean cognitive learning, but rather it is learning situated in, or dependence on, social practices that are embedded in an institution’s historical body of practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore each of us was learning to develop a social identity, to move from novice to experienced scholar in her institutional culture and the academy. Our collaborative relationship drew on generations of knowledge that none of us could access alone. There was, in essence, a growing interdependence of a body of practice and thought. Each of us had to suspend her defined specialty of interest in education (i.e., music, policy, instructional design, mathematics and multicultural issues) for the development of the whole. Yet, for each of us, the territory was ultimately germane to her individual growth.

Initially, mentoring focused on helping each peer develop as an individual agent for her own productivity. As time went on, however, the group itself became an object

of agency and we developed a collective voice. An outcome of this agency was collaborative action. As we tested our perspectives together and on one another, we learned how to merge our representational frameworks and worldviews into a common understanding of our shared experiences. As we worked together on writing, we learned to be aware of and value how each peer interpreted her own experience. In addition, we came to realize that merely working together was not the sole nature of our collaboration. Our collaboration involved learning how to adapt and incorporate another person's worldview.

Throughout the 14 months we met, we read each other's work, listened to individual and collective concerns and complaints and soothed fears. We used strong-arm tactics, using expressions such as: 'You have got to get that article submitted,' 'Get off the pity pot and get to work,' and 'If you want tenure, you gotta act like you want tenure.' At the same time, we developed the trust and emotional support that could only come from a group of women who share a similar experience – in this case, seeking tenure in a research university.

Overall, group members experienced three processes. First, we learned to mentor each other as trusted and valued peers, using our developing assets as university professors in the areas of writing and cultural knowledge. Second, we moved from solitary work into collaborative work, in which we learned to write together, depending on each other in quite different ways, and how to negotiate meaning and interpretation of shared, albeit differently experienced, events. Finally, we developed individually an understanding of self, other and environment by understanding these differently experienced events and shared and differing interpretations. This allowed us to become independent scholars in our own right. By listening and attending to each other, we sighted the North Star that can guide us through the seas of the academy. We each found a way to pursue tenure in a more positive way, recognizing that we are valuable and valued aspiring scholars who bring our gifts of research, scholarship, teaching and service to the university.

Evidence that we had reached unity was summarized by one of the collaborators during the writing and editing of this article: 'The fascinating thing to me is that it does sound as if it were written by one person. I find it difficult to remember who did what.' We have moved away from juggling lives framed by gendered roles to composing lives (Bateson, 1989) that allow us to reach our potential as scholars and writers who write for pleasure, for personal and professional goals, and for the purpose of being able to follow our chosen careers.

Our journey shows that peer mentoring can facilitate a sense of self, others and the environment. Our peer mentoring experience gave us the confidence to define who we were as scholars, both within the group and as contributing scholars in the context of the university. As a result, our value as individual writers increased significantly. In addition, collaboration – as imperfect as it may appear – was able to generate a capstone product for the group. This article, as an outcome of the group's collaboration, is perhaps the strongest evidence that the path from isolation, through peer mentoring, to collaboration can be a successful and rewarding one.

Conclusion

Dyadic mentoring has been shown to create feelings of isolation and professional inadequacy among some pre-tenured women university faculty. In contrast, peer mentoring can encourage women faculty to explore, through developing collaboration, their role

in the academy through understanding of (a) self, (b) others and (c) the university environment and their place within it. This understanding of place leads to the independence of each person's voice in performing scholarship and research and a clear sense of direction in her progression toward obtaining tenure.

This study suggests that in an academic environment growing in diversity, traditional methods of peer support, such as dyadic mentoring, should begin to give way to peer mentoring efforts, which may be influential in allowing women, minority groups and other faculty to understand themselves, their peers and their combined role in the university environment. At the same time, peer mentoring may also encourage the independent conductance of scholarship and research that is so essential not only to tenure, but also to learning.

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