

Doctoral Cohort Mentoring

Interdependence, Collaborative Learning, and Cultural Change

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Abstract

This article explores the value of cohort mentoring for facilitating as well as structuring mentoring relationships involving students and faculty. A narrative case study is provided of a doctoral cohort, with focus on the experienced teacher's development as scholar-practitioner leader. While informal and semiformal cohorts have a viable presence within many universities, they have failed to receive institutional support and adequate attention in the extant literature. Specifically, the Writers in Training (WIT), a semiformal university cohort program, provided feedback primarily through audiotaped dialogue, with additional information derived from textual artifacts. The results highlight the relevance of interdependence, collaborative learning, and cultural change to cohort mentoring. Implications suggest the need for rewards and policies that support such grassroots initiatives aimed at the successful socialization, success, and graduation of students.

Collaborative learning marshals the power of interdependence among peers. . . . Students learn the craft of interdependence. (Bruffee, 1999, pp. xii–xiii)

The practicing teacher who is striving to become an academician and leader can expect to experience increased success in graduate school where exposed to collaborative models of learning. We, the authors, are concerned with the preparation of doctoral students in educational leadership (EDL) for whom engagement in their program and dissertation as scholar-practitioner leader is critical. Relevant to this discussion, it is recognized that the *scholar-practitioner leader* recognizes “the primacy of conversation” for his or her work in human affairs, especially when needing to reach consensus among those with “divergent positions” (Horn, 2002, p. 84).

In the EDL discipline, most students are full-time teachers pursuing their doctorates on a part-time basis. Indeed, the extant literature describes the difficulty school practitioners face with the struggle to balance career, family, and work (Twale & Kochan, 2000). Given this picture of stresses, fewer than 50% of students, in North America at least, obtain doctorates in education (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). Nonetheless, while personal circumstances may account for some portion of this attrition rate, graduate faculties remain charged with finding ways to shepherd students through their degree programs. Within this high-pressure context, Bruffee (1999) attests that faculty can make a difference by acculturating students into knowledge communities. Central to this effort is the mobilization and sustainability of academic support groups.

Purpose, Definitions, and Context

The purpose of this narrative case study is to explore the role and practice of effective pedagogical practices that support the development of scholar-practitioner leaders through collaborative learning in the academy (Bruffee, 1999; Horn, 2001; Patel, 2003). The underlying problem studied is twofold: Doctoral students as a group experience high attrition and many express dissatisfaction with the supervision being received. As a professor and doctoral student joining forces, we investigated doctoral cohort mentoring using dialogue as the basis of our narrative inquiry approach; furthermore, we have attempted to analyze the benefits and detriments presented by this solution in general and in regard to a specific case. The research question we asked was: “What is the process and effect of mentoring on the grassroots doctoral cohort in which we participate?”

Herein, we define *mentoring cohort* as a collaborative faculty–student group that extends support to doctoral students and their academic mentors (Mullen, 2005). Support groups, such as the WIT cohort, are special kinds of learning communities constituted by those seeking to undergo a similar process of change and who depend on one another to help fulfill needs, resolve issues, and address uncertainty. The familiar practice of *collaborative learning* among adults capitalizes on the capacity of students to “govern themselves in a context of substantive engagement, conversation, and negotiation” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 89).

Our focus on doctoral mentoring herein involves a semiformal faculty–student cohort initiative associated with a premier research institution located in west central Florida. Known as the Writers in Training (“WIT” in the singular and “WITs” when referring to members) this educational leadership cohort has the dual agenda of preparing students as dissertation researchers and as scholar-practitioners. Indeed, it is difficult to know the extent to which such noninstitutional groups that foster as well as structure naturally occurring mentoring relationships involving students and faculty even occur in the academy. However, other cases involving informal doctoral cohorts meeting with their professor-mentors outside of structured courses and regular work hours have been reported. Additionally, positive results have accrued for students who move beyond personal isolation and engage as interdependent learners—not only as educational inquirers (Witte & James, 1998) but also as social justice activists (Horn, 2001).

Overall, though, only limited attention has been paid to doctoral cohorts in the literature. When doctoral cohorts are addressed, a formal, institutionalized model is usually highlighted (Horn, 2001). As an alternative, we present a modified cohort model that functions informally but that incorporates formal elements for addressing the inadequate mentoring many doctoral students report experiencing.

Mentorship itself, as evidenced by its confusion with teaching and learning, tends to be a murky concept. It can indeed be seen as a holistic form of teaching and learning that embraces the professional and the personal, the psychosocial and career facets of a protégé’s development, and such activities as advising, tutoring, coaching, and counseling (Johnson & Huwe, 2003). Furthermore, effective mentoring has special qualities, notably the developmental opportunity involved in learning partnerships, as well as flexibility in activity settings, support group structures, and value placed on learning as a shared, lifelong endeavor. The concept and act of mentoring can be better understood by making distinctions. To clarify, someone may be a fine lecturer or teacher but not necessarily a good mentor (Johnson & Huwe, 2003).

Despite the fact that multiple forms of mentoring occur inside and outside the classroom, it is seen as a personal relationship between two people—a knowing, experienced professional and a protégé—who commit to an advisory (typically nonevaluative) context that often involves a long-term goal. While the pervasive view of mentoring as a one-on-one relational experience represents *one* valid mode, it is oversimplified. Moreover, mentoring has the capacity to function at the group level, where not only interpersonal change can occur but also cultural and systemic. Mentoring, then, is becoming valued as a change force at even the most executive levels of organizations.

Building on a previous pilot study (Mullen, 2003), we seek to examine both the process and outcomes associated with nonformalized doctoral mentoring cohorts that are planned, not strictly spontaneous, in their form and activity. In doing so, we avoid the need for an imposed dichotomy of formal versus informal mentoring. Instead, we present an original model of a hybrid mentoring cohort

that has been organically formed based upon the dynamics and needs of a particular group and simultaneously formalized into a faculty member's advising of doctoral students. While this study confirms the overall value placed on HE cohorts in the educational literature (Horn, 2001; Miller & Irby, 1999), it offers new insight into cohort mentoring in the form of hybrid structures. Additionally, the voices of the group members have been recognized herein, privileging the students' perceptions and thereby increasing the reliability of the results shared (Campbell & Campbell, 1997).

Educational Models of Mentorship

Cohort Mentoring

Generally, cohorts provide a solution to the deficits of traditional mentoring by proactively fostering collaboration between students and their faculty mentors, as well as self-governance and ownership of the work (Bruffee, 1999). Ideally, doctoral mentoring cohorts increase student contentment and quality of work in such areas as research, writing, and problem solving. Case studies and evaluative reports of mentoring cohorts indicate that they have the great potential to dramatically enhance students' cognitive and affective experience in their doctoral programs (Blake-Beard, 2001; Horn, 2001).

Educators assert that mentoring cohorts support many other positive outcomes for students as well. Notably, cohort members are more likely to complete their degree program than noncohort students (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). Likewise, doctoral students belonging to cohorts have the opportunity to consult with a group and feel camaraderie while completing the dissertation (Patel, 2003). They are also able to more readily develop as scholarly writers, gaining a facility with identifying meaningful problems for study, collecting data and conducting analyses, engaging collaboratively in problem solving, and discoursing about ideas encountered in research—all essential skills for entering academia (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000) as well as the principalship (Mullen & Cairns, 2001).

Importantly, mentoring cohorts can stimulate higher-order critical thinking and encourage intellectual development (Bruffee, 1999). Cohort meetings should allow students to practice thinking and research skills in a "safe" environment of one's peers. Research mishaps or writing difficulties get addressed in the collegial atmosphere of the cohort (Johnson & Huwe, 2003). For those who are actively engaged as cohort members, their academic progress may be attributed, at least in part, to the effectiveness of the group.

In fact, participating in a cohort group can support individuals professionally, personally, and academically (Johnson & Huwe, 2003). Close collaboration with colleagues helps instill a sense of scholarly and professional identity. Likewise, working closely with others—especially those with similar interests, goals, and aspirations—forms the bonds necessary to build *and* sustain a community of learners (Blake-Beard, 2001; Horn, 2001). As Burnett (1999) asserts,

students belonging to cohorts “felt less isolated” because they could converse with peers about “common issues and concerns” within the context of “a collaborative framework” (p. 48). Academic and professional development will occur as alliances are formed within the group. Recognizing the importance of establishing such peer relationships and embracing diversity in the academic community, many researchers have stressed the value of mentoring cohorts to minority and female doctoral students (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004).

In addition to benefiting students, mentoring cohorts can also help faculty. By effectively utilizing this model, the doctoral supervisor can monitor and advise multiple students simultaneously (Witte & James, 1998) and also actively learn from students as they help one another. This contributes to efficiency for professors otherwise engaged in traditional student–advisor relationships (Burnett, 1999), even though one-one-one mentoring and office hours continue to be necessary. Also, many university faculty are now expected to fulfill the double (but controversial) agenda of providing support to doctoral students not only as scholars but also as practitioners preparing for the professions. Graduate students majoring in educational leadership, for example, will need proficiency at a range of skills, including problem-solving and budgeting, collaborating with and empowering others, and promoting diversity within schools (Mullen & Cairns, 2001).

Recognizing the myriad of challenges facing doctoral students and the associated low rate of program completion, Burnett (1999) states, “the provision of support, particularly during the dissertation phase of a doctoral program, may be one way to increase completion rates” (p. 46). For this reason, students value cohorts with a dissertation focus. Especially appreciated are those that confront the perennial problem of disillusionment and academic failure, as well as writing and inquiry challenges (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). For example, by studying the draft papers produced by individuals, cohort members can gain critical insight into their discipline as well as confidence in their own writing, editing, and critiquing skills (Bruffee, 1999). Members who become self-assured in assessing student work grow into peer mentors who contribute to the intellectual life of the group itself (Horn, 2001).

Notwithstanding its benefits, cohort mentoring also presents unique challenges that should not be overlooked. The formalized mentoring cohort to which many doctoral students belong throughout their entire graduate program is a forum in which pedagogical challenges and group dynamics can intensify. Consequently, sociopsychological forces can segregate students deemed unpopular or undermine teacher authority, as in implicit demands for unrealistic assistance with writing and research or avoidance of recommendations for progressing through the program or on writing drafts. In addition, mentoring groups that have bonded may initially see newcomers (students and faculty) as unwanted intruders.

Formal and Informal Mentoring

Formal and informal cohort mentoring alike occurs in Higher Education (HE) institutions, but the institutionalized option is much better documented. Conversely,

informal mentoring may involve greater commitment and necessitates higher risk, as the assistance promised to an individual does not always occur.

While frequently used in the literature, *formal mentoring* varies widely and is dependent on the context and discipline from which the research emanates. In general, however, most definitions fall into one of two categories: (1) a one-on-one relationship (often assigned by the university) between a faculty advisor and a doctoral student (Orpen, 1997); and (2) the institutionalizing of a cohort that meets to propel student development on a regular schedule (Twale & Kochan, 2000).

Cited less frequently, *informal mentoring* is naturally occurring and spontaneous, less rigidly structured, and not officially recognized by the institution—despite having one or more faculty members as mentors (Blake-Beard, 2001). Informal cohorts are voluntary mentoring systems built on collaborative learning in which both the mentor and students exchange ideas in a collegial fashion (Blake-Beard, 2001). However, some researchers believe that the informal cohort model may actually offer more advantages than a formal mentoring program for assisting students in finishing a doctoral degree (e.g., Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). Without the concern of being graded, and through the human connection that comes with long-term exposure to mentors and peers, students are less likely to feel “judged” (Blake-Beard, 2001; Miller & Irby, 1999).

Interestingly, because the WIT program is a structured, facilitated, and organized program of mentoring, some scholars of mentorship have wondered if it might better fit the definition of formal mentoring. However, the WIT program has not been “institutionalized” in the usual sense of a cohort program, that is, with graduate students who have been organized in such as way as to take a series of courses together, to experience a variety of instructors, and to meet for a designated period and within the assigned timeframe of a calendar. The WIT program is, instead, a manifestation of the first author’s system for managing a large number of assigned doctoral advisees and candidates, aimed at propelling student development and academic success in ways that meet the group’s needs (Witte & James, 1998, report a similar set-up). However, perhaps the literature as a whole overstates the distinction between formal and informal mentoring. Notwithstanding, as we will illustrate, the two models can be usefully reformed to create a synergistic hybrid reflective of contexts and preferences. The resultant model tends to work effectively when the best attributes of an informal cohort are combined with the structured components, bimonthly meetings, turn taking, and guidelines for producing work found in formal heuristics (Mullen, 2003, 2005).

The Writer in Training (WIT) Cohort

Background Issues

Observing the heavy demand for mentoring within her graduate department and the reality that doctoral students were “falling through the cracks” of the traditional systems in place, the first author, an experienced doctoral supervisor

in curriculum and educational leadership, created the Writer in Training (WIT) cohort. She had arrived at the current university in 2000 as a new faculty member from another institution. Numerous students—simply overwhelmed by the individualized dissertation process and yet eager to participate in a cohort group—approached her to be their dissertation chair (major professor). Collectively, the students were new to social science writing (empirical and narrative research), and thus faced similar challenges. What is more, students who could otherwise learn from one another lacked a mechanism for exchanging knowledge. Given these circumstances, the creation of a mentoring group made sense. The more time a student spends with a mentor, the greater the academic gains (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Patel, 2003).

The WIT cohort meets biweekly at the university, once monthly at the professor's home for 5 hours, and individually as scheduled with the mentor, as well as with one another. Members also discourse and exchange materials online via the WIT listserv. Because the university calendar does not dictate when and where the students meet—one draw of a more informal structure—sessions are flexibly arranged over the duration of a student's program. Each meeting is student-driven and has an agenda onto which individuals can opt to add their work, on a rotational "as-needed" basis. Agenda items feature literature reviews, research instruments, and dissertation proposals and chapters. Because students are encouraged to join early, this support continues from program entry to graduation.

Some students might believe that helping others in a group setting may set back their own progress, but this is simply not the case. As confirmed in this study, and as supported within the literature, students garner significant benefits for collaborating with their peers (Horn, 2001; Twale & Kochan, 2000). In particular, students who work together across the different stages of the doctoral program are engaged in highly intensive developmental learning, which is also inclusive of and rewarding for newcomers. This set up contrasts starkly from mentoring groups (i.e., formal cohorts) that are assigned based upon the student's time of entry into a program and research progress.

Profile and Demographics

The WIT cohort is comprised of doctorate of education (Ed.D.) and philosophy (Ph.D.) students (currently 17, including graduates) for whom the faculty mentor serves as dissertation supervisor (chair). Some of these developing scholar-practitioner leaders are completing their dissertations, while others are early in their coursework, and most are full-time practitioners in K–12 public school education. The students' ages span from 27 to 56. A variety of ethnic groups are reflected in the cohort, including African Americans, Latino Americans, and White Americans. The group also benefits from diversity with 4 males and 13 females. Diversity is further reflected in the WITs' backgrounds. Most have elementary or secondary teaching experience and strive to become principals but

not all. Like the students themselves, the dissertation topics, most of which are school-based, are vibrant, diverse, and practical.

Data Collection and Research Methods

In the previously reported 2002 pilot study, the WIT cohort was found to enhance the students' socialization into the academic community and doctoral program in three areas: developing a sense of identity and belonging, supporting learning and attainment of dreams, and experiencing a faculty–student support model (Mullen, 2003, 2005). The current study, which commenced 2 years later, was established to further investigate the perceptions of the WIT cohort over time. As will be discussed, through the continued use of a narrative case study analysis (as recommended by Connelly and Clandinin [1990] for deepening insight and increasing significance), ample support was found for this cohort intervention as well as for student satisfaction relative to the mentoring received.

Recognizing the need to understand the learning dynamics of the WIT cohort more fully and from the viewpoint of all participating members, we, the cohort professor-mentor and a student researcher (a WIT member), determined that an analysis of audiorecorded WIT meetings (24 two-sided audiotapes) and WIT textual artifacts (three binders of materials) would provide a robust dataset for thematic analysis.

All 17 WITs agreed to be audiotaped during group interchanges over a 2-year period. Participants were provided copies of their audiorecordings of the WIT sessions in which their papers were discussed. The taping of cohort sessions is a standard procedure for the members, as they find it beneficial to refer to these resources when writing. (The dialogic selections made for this paper are presented verbatim from these audiotapes.) Upon receipt, we transcribed the audiotapes and interpreted the transcripts applying Miles and Huberman's (1994) protocols for qualitative data management, display, and analysis. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality on the transcriptions, individuals were identified only as "male" or "female," along with their stage in the doctoral program. (The professor worked from the nonidentifying data only.) Once completed, we placed our tentative results into chart form to facilitate comparison.

Again adopting the Miles and Huberman (1994) schematic process, we carefully analyzed the data and placed our independent findings into a matrix. Once these steps were completed, we then synthesized the results from the two data sources. Because we had first analyzed the data separately and because our coded results (e.g., BEL = belonging; BEL/ISO = tension between belonging and isolation) overlapped, our researcher reliability was enhanced. Moreover, by using an anecdotal approach to teacher development and communities of learning, as authenticated by Connelly and Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry (e.g., 1990), we have possibly complemented and even informed empirical study of scholarly practitioner development.

Thematic Analysis of the Data

Overall, the thematic results serve to illuminate and expand the areas—from the more practical to the more transformative—that were highlighted within the pilot study.

Enabling Social Science Writing and Research

New WIT members (not unlike most new students in any doctoral program) have expectations as to what constitutes an appropriate writing style and level of quality. Based on our analysis of the data, it was apparent that all WITs initially experience a learning curve in achieving satisfactory results. For example, one WIT commented that she needed continual assistance in making her “writing less flowery and the meaning more exact.” Another WIT expressed difficulty in being “as accurate with my messages as I need to be.” Based on the audiotaped transcriptions, the WIT cohort had attention on adopting a form of academic discourse appropriate to educational inquiry and social science.

As evident from the three data sources used for this study, different types of efforts are made for addressing such challenges in learning. For instance, WITs bring their preselected writings to the cohort meetings for assistance from their peers and mentor, who have prepared by reading the material and providing detailed written comments. Prior to the meeting, the WIT facilitator (a peer who is not the student researcher) creates the student-based agenda and electronically distributes advance copies to the cohort. This enables the group to prepare for a meaningful discussion of the scheduled papers and questions raised. The WITs support this active involvement with such comments as the “process we use to communicate and work keeps me on my toes.” Members are also conscious of the accountability associated with participation: “I know people are expecting me to be there and with feedback and helpful suggestions. I can’t let them down.” By applying their energies to a peer’s work in progress, WITs know that the helping hand will be reciprocal.

Importantly, students found this critique of their writing to be an invaluable aspect of the mentoring cohort. Assistance with deepening thinking and improving writing was a primary motivator for attending meetings and helping others. Here is how one WIT explained this transformative process:

At first, I was really discouraged by the complexity of the comments made at the meetings and the numerous writing changes I was given. But I got over it. I realized that if I really thought hard about the issues raised and considered what the group suggested relative to my own writing that my work would probably get much better. And it did. And I’m also moving along faster.

Internalizing constructive criticism, a WIT member reflected: “With the feedback I receive that I reflect in my papers, I can see myself growing as a writer within a social context.”

Research Format. Research is the most difficult part of writing a dissertation, or so the WIT students believed. They also presumed that it is *the* differentiating factor between writing a dissertation and a long course paper. Many examples were found in the data regarding situations when WITS members needed help in conceptualizing, developing, and formatting their research, as well as creating the instruments for data collection and outlining procedures. The cohort provides a place for the research format to be discussed and explained as fully as possible. In one instance, the professor-mentor and two WITs engaged in dialogue with a student:

Mentor: Look at how you just naturally picked a mixed-method [qualitative and quantitative] approach to your research based on your verbal description of the intended study and its scope. You've accomplished this just by talking aloud and by using reason, not by *trying* to use the language of social science inquiry.

Male WIT: Because you will be using surveys and interviews, you are inclined toward mixed methods, which is a good place to work from in trying to understand how you think about research itself in the broader scheme of things.

Female WIT: Right, people will want you to say why you are orienting the study that way and not, say, as a pure statistical study or an ethnographic description.

As another example, after having worked through a similar problem, one WIT commented to another: "As we have learned in this room, whatever you pick as the magical number of people to interview, make sure it makes sense to you. You have to justify the number selected to your committee. It's a meaningful selection, not arbitrary." Another agreed with her: "Yes, this is where my committee nailed me. I had to have a reason as to why I picked the number that I did but I couldn't think of one."

Paper Organization and Syntax. Our analysis also highlighted the difficulty WITs faced in clearly and completely expressing their ideas. As a result, the meaning and significance of their research findings were often obscured due to imprecise and overly complicated sentence structures. Addressing this challenge sometimes required such writing activity as simplifying sentences; adding explanation, examples, or qualifiers; incorporating evidence for assertions; and removing hyperbole. The mentor was viewed as someone who frequently helped in this regard. For example, in one meeting she commented on a student's work, offering a solution:

Mentor: Here is your research strategy—I see it now in the paper. However, we the readers could not identify it without your verbal explanation.

The text needs to be able to stand on its own. You'll need to explain this process, which will eliminate the verbiage. Let's go step-by-step. Take your time. Start slowly from the beginning, and let us hear the thoughts behind your writing. Talk it out for us. Then you can go back and transcribe what you are about to say and revise it for suitability in your paper.

In other instances, the professor-mentor works in tandem with student peers and they with her to help struggling members. In one such case, a female student who had been grappling for months with the concept paper for her dissertation was placed on the agenda yet again. Here, a WIT peer and mentor can be seen working together to assist the student in differentiating between the introduction and the background in her writing, which enabled the student to resolve a major writing problem:

Male WIT: The background and the introduction are meshed together. You need to separate them.

Mentor: Good. [To this male peer:] Where might that section end?

(The same) male WIT: Here with the words, "the last decade."

Mentor: Yes. [To the original student:] Do you see this?

Female WIT: I do. There have been so many paragraphs moving around in my writing that it gets confusing. I knew that we'd talk about it here and get me organized enough in my thinking that I'd be able to go back to the writing.

Our analysis also suggested that the WITs needed support in fairly mechanistic tasks, such as knowing and consistently using American Psychological Association (APA) format. Indeed, our data sources confirmed that the students had problems documenting sources properly, despite the hands-on attention given to this task within the group. One WIT explained that he had simply "never learned this stuff before." But the student followed up after receiving help from the cohort: "I'm starting to work it out. I don't feel so dumb, because all of us are working together."

The APA manual covers not only proper reference citation but also many other crucial research elements, which the students were exposed to at all sessions. A typical comment made by the mentor (and, to some extent, the WIT graduates) in the transcriptions is:

Many terms exist in your paper that need defining. The APA manual makes this step a requirement of writing. You have at least two options—define the key terms directly in your text or include a glossary and refer readers to it. Regardless, the terms should be explained and, on a more subtle level, once you work through this decision then reflect how your thinking concurs with or departs from the sources you are citing. Your definitions may or

may not emulate those belonging to other writers, so let readers know how you are orienting them to your subject.

Ethical Dilemmas. In addition to writing and reporting, appropriate research practices also proved to be troublesome for many WITs. Indeed, even though the cohort spent many sessions discussing approaches to collecting and analyzing data, ethical problems nonetheless arose. What follows is an excerpt of an exchange in which a student who had been programmatically inactive for over a year had inadvertently collected data without the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects' approval. As this move was clearly unacceptable, she needed guidance and options before proceeding:

Mentor: Did you get IRB approval to send out this survey?

Female WIT: No, I just wanted to see what type of information I needed.

Mentor: This is a problem, you see, and one that we will now have to solve.

No researcher can collect data without IRB approval. Our choices at this time are to ignore the data you have collected, which is a small sample really, and chalk this up to a lesson learned. Or, you can submit a protocol to the Research Compliance office, explaining honestly what happened, and pending approval call it pilot data.

Female WIT: This is really what I was doing, just collecting pilot data.

Mentor: Okay, then we need to send it to IRB with my advisor's signature.

But you can't do anything else in the way of contacting participants or collecting data until you hear back, and approval is the best possible outcome we can hope for.

Supporting Interdependence and Goals

Support for student interdependence and goals were evident by the time spontaneously taken by the WITs to underscore the importance of our learning community. For example, one WIT expressed how pleased she was with the progress she had been making since joining the group after she had failed her proposal defense with another dissertation supervisor. When she shared this viewpoint within the group, she expressed herself emotionally, stressing that such cohorts as the WIT are rare within the greater context of academia:

Female WIT: I don't mean to brown-nose, but this had to be shared. This experience we are having together is very rare. You [the mentor] reach out to us and help. Not everyone reaches out. Also, this group helps where they can. Most of the WITs work full time and have families. I read that 85% of women who start this process never finish it. That's scary. But I'm starting to believe it can be done.

Male WIT: As a WIT you soon learn not to get discouraged. I felt unsupported before the WITs' group. No matter how hard I worked I felt

unprepared in a committee forum, but I tell you it gets better. You just have to hang on through it all with us.

WIT members supported one another in their goals and aspirations, a reality that seems to under gird a cultural change process. Because they shared a similar goal of completing the doctoral degree, the students related well to one another, forming strong interpersonal bonds. These feelings were strongly expressed in the transcripts, demonstrating that group cohesion appears to motivate individual student performance. With one another's support, meeting deadlines and following guidelines became easier. One WIT described the metamorphosis she experienced after joining the cohort:

After I completed my coursework and qualifying exam, I wandered around aimlessly for a good while, blaming others for my lack of vision and motivation. It wasn't until recently, through pointed but caring conversations with my major professor, that I took ownership of the doctoral process.

The group also supported members by sharing ideas and thoughts about the papers presented at the WIT meetings. In fact, the simple accountability of knowing that their work would be peer reviewed encouraged students to become more focused and excel:

You want to do your best, and you know next week someone might be looking at your work. You want them to take the same time and energy with your work that you do with theirs. So, I take my time with each person's paper and try to give good hints and advice.

Moreover, many WITs stated that the expectation of sharing and reviewing others' work provided significant motivation. These WITs wanted to be seen as scholars who were an active part of a productive community with high expectations of quality:

I didn't want to look unprepared and unread, so I would read others' works as assigned and get my own papers ready for others to review. If I was on the agenda, I knew people were expecting a product. I didn't want to let them or myself down.

Overall, the WITs found the support provided by the group to be invaluable. The suggestions from both the professor-mentor and their peers informed their subsequent work efforts. In this manner, the WITs believed that the cohort significantly improved their chances of success in the doctoral program and as graduates as well. As one WIT put it, "I can't imagine doing a doctoral degree without this kind of help, or writing for publication alone, or seeking placement or promotion

afterwards without the support of my mentor and the group. Unfortunately, some students have no choice.”

Appreciating the importance of a “safe environment” for doctoral students to experiment with ideas and research structures, we sought to test the WITs’ level of comfort within the cohort. Overall, the WITs described their experiences as “safe” and “nonthreatening.” As usual, the WITs were often intimidated at first, but they quickly adjusted. Here is how one WIT described the socialization process:

At first, I wasn’t sure if I was going to like it. I am very uncertain about criticism and take my work and myself too seriously. However, once I started observing what was going on, I saw this group as extremely beneficial. I don’t worry that anyone will find my ideas below par. And if they were, the WITs would help me to rethink them and to resolve my writing problems.

Clearly, interdependence within mentoring cohort groups should not strictly conjure a rosy picture. For instance, one WIT member became a little irritated with the seemingly insignificant grammatical clarification made by a peer who was less advanced in her program. While this provides a good example of elaboration, it also underscores the importance of patience, power-sharing, and generosity in situations requiring interdependence. In this scenario, the male student was not being clear about what “career” his writing was referring to. The student who spoke up thought that greater precision was called for in his word choice—and her advice carried a political message:

Female WIT: There seems to be a problem here. You have something like “the subject will be talked about throughout.” Throughout what? Your life? Your career? This paper? What?

Male WIT: I’m missing a direct object. I got it! I got it!

Female WIT: You know what I mean, right? I just don’t want your doctoral committee to jump all over this section.

Male WIT: Yeah sure. Right.

Female WIT: I guess I’m playing devil’s advocate. I know what you mean by that sentence based on your explanation here today, but the reader may not, so that’s where I’m coming from.

Safety, comfort, and momentary discomforts—some attributed to ego conflicts—were all part of the interdependence at play within the WIT cohort. Regardless, the focus remained on members helping one another to avoid poor performance and strengthen opportunities for success. Overall, members revealed that a successful group environment consists of individuals who hold one another accountable for being productive, for producing quality work, and for being socially connected. As one WIT aptly stated, “I know I am not alone; there are others who feel the way I do about the task at hand. They are with me, and I am with them.”

Creating a Socially Vibrant Mentoring Model

Our results suggest that the synergy produced by assistance from peers and the professor-mentor enhanced learning outcomes. These two forces acting in concert supported the students' writing development and scholarly identity more than either force acting alone. A WIT exemplified this point:

It is so cool that I get all this help and at no financial expense to myself; sometimes she [the professor-mentor] may give some advice, but I really don't know how to use it. I think it sounds really good, but I'm not sure at the time how it would look in my paper. Then, one of my WIT friends adds onto her advice, and it becomes crystal clear. Then, I know how to use it.

Indeed, the synergistic structure of the WIT cohort helps to illuminate problems and assist students in addressing them. A dissertation is a daunting task for many, even more so when the method of discourse appears both foreign and impenetrable. The cohort helps this adjustment because working together breeds confidence, resulting in a willingness to experiment and take intellectual and social risks.

As this suggests, interdependence within a socially vibrant mentoring context also means that students sometimes comprehend one another more clearly than their mentors. This implies that faculty need to tap into students as translators when their feedback (e.g., articulation of an idea) is impenetrable or ambiguous. For example, in one WIT session a student had difficulty understanding his mentor in regard to adopting a particular strategy for improving his literature review. The student had used an unacceptable format, which was not unique to him, and the professor tried to sensitively raise this point:

Mentor: I believe this text is workable but that you can take it to another level. You can accomplish this just by making one change throughout the work. On page 27, and this is a typical example, that whole paragraph revolves around a single source. You depend on a single source to create every paragraph of the writing. But you actually need to synthesize your key sources and scaffold the writing at a metalevel. Falling by the wayside are the overarching themes that have yet to be constructed. Think of yourself as looking out at the field of educational leadership and trying to make sense of a part of it.

Male WIT: I see where you mean but it's hard to grasp. Are you are saying that I have to speak in my own voice?

Mentor: No, not exactly.

Female WIT: Let me help. I recently struggled with this issue at a WITs meeting. You have to figure out what the main message is that you want to get across. Ask yourself, what is my message? It will change

somewhat in each paragraph. Back up your points by citing the key researchers that say the same thing.

Male WIT: [Not the writer.] Right, as a writer you're depending on one source at a time and on paraphrases of each to get by. But you aren't capturing the literature or even making any major points. You're probably feeling overwhelmed and broke down the task into small chunks to manage it. You just need to pull out the major themes from a number of key sources, say six or seven. Then cite the group of thinkers in parenthesis after you've made your big point. It's a different strategy than what you're using, that's all.

Throughout the transcriptions of WIT meetings, the WITs also outlined many other benefits of their cohort model. In particular, the students reported that their professor-mentor strove to make her students critical thinkers and appreciative colleagues, as well as more effective researchers and better writers. One WIT expressed appreciation for "the fact that my major professor helps us make our writing better." Other WITs expressed similar ideas. They asserted that the mentor "enjoyed hearing their ideas" and "really seemed to be listening carefully" to their concerns about the dissertation process.

Because the focus within the WIT cohort is exclusively on student writing and critique, an exception to this was held as a special workshop. One group member expressed appreciation for the professor's willingness to "get our input on a book she wrote on beginning school leaders and to hold it as a special forum apart from the WIT agendas." Studies of collaborative learning reveal that this statement may be more important than it appears. Students who have access to their professor's draft writing as critical readers are being placed in a position of power-sharing. And the mentor will know intimately what it feels like to be vulnerable within a group and to occupy the same level as one's students, which provides a healthy checkpoint for anyone who seeks power over others or feels superior (Bruffee, 1999).

The WITs seemed to overcome having felt like "lowly doctoral students" where relevant in their programs, courses, and prior supervisory contexts largely because the traditional advisor–advisee relationship had been redefined. One WIT described the new relationship:

We create ideas and research knowledge together. When we are in the WIT meetings or in our major professor's office, there is no condescension. There is an equality that is assuring and empowering to me. I feel more confident to finish this dissertation and start using my knowledge to effect change.

Another added: "I'm glad to have found this group and my professor. I really feel like I belong here."

In addition, the WITs expressed gratitude for the peer mentoring that the WIT cohort enabled. Despite the various stages of matriculation reflected, based on the input received no one was made to feel more or less important than anyone else. Students further along in the process helped those still doing coursework, and those just beginning were encouraged to help those more advanced by asking astute questions, raising solutions to research dilemmas, or addressing writing issues. In the WIT cohort, mentoring transpired across all programmatic levels and differences, primarily gender, race, and class.

Given the synergistic nature of the cohort, power must be balanced between the professor-mentor and the peer-mentors, and among the students themselves. A few studies reflect the need for doctoral mentors in advanced HE programs to balance power to support equality and emancipation (e.g., Burnett, 1999). Certainly at the undergraduate level, classroom teaching is rooted in “academic authority and disciplinary power” in such forms as grading and assessment. It is thus riddled with nonnegotiable dynamics of “control and surveillance,” and so should not be confused with emancipation for students (Walker & Warhurst, 2000, p. 46). Unfortunately, these dynamics continue at the graduate level.

Realizing the importance of authority, governance, and control as potential issues in our study, we sought honest feedback on the power dynamics within the group. Overall, our analysis of the data suggests that power within the group was generally balanced. One WIT plainly stated:

There is no power imbalance. Our agenda is student generated. Everyone shares his or her ideas and notions equally. My professor makes sure that all meetings have a “round robin” format, so there’s time for each person to share their suggestions with the authors on their work. She stimulates thoughts and also interjects when something has been left out of the conversation.

The WIT cohort model draws its strength from these highly synergetic relationships and dynamics. Indeed, the comfort and security of membership is a recurrent theme in the transcript data: “It’s like I know exactly what my peers are going through because I have been through it before, or I’m going through it right now. That is a very comforting thought.” Another WIT added:

I really look forward to meeting with the WITs and the professor. I know when I leave each session I will do so with something valuable that I can use to improve my writing and myself. I know they will be there to help me when I need it. And I know I will be there when they need guidance or just someone to talk to.

A picture of a productive cohort focused on student interests and needs emerged from our data analysis, one that encourages group learning through the support

of a socially vibrant mentoring model. By exchanging knowledge about writing/research practices, WIT members contributed to the learning gains of the group, as did the professor who fostered conditions for intellectual, emotional, and social growth. It may be that nontraditional (alternative) mentors ideally model lifelong learning and interdependence, as well as relinquish control but not responsibility. Ideally, such guides suspend their egos and support the concept of a group acting as a mentor in a way that no “expert” probably can.

Discussion

These thematic results enhanced and extended those discovered 2 years earlier (Mullen, 2003). Specifically, we have narrated a case illustrating that doctoral cohort mentoring can encourage interdependence, collaborative learning, and cultural change. Strategies for ensuring these outcomes highlighted group assistance in developing the skills of social science research and writing style; support of students’ academic and professional goals; and functioning within a successful mentoring model.

Importantly, the WITs expressed a strong sense of connectedness to one another, as well as a feeling of “accountability” associated with being part of the group. It appears that mutual support is a critical factor in student success, progress, and well beingness. For example, the WIT cohort significantly assisted students in developing the awareness and skills necessary for functioning as social science writers and researchers, as well as thoughtful, connecting peers. Notably, the WIT cohort helped these neophyte researchers to overcome their bewilderment of the dissertation process and to develop the mindset of being resourceful. A typical comment to this effect was, “I am feeling that I am not alone. If I need help, there is someone there for me. I’m getting better and better, but I could never have done this alone.”

Regarding the WIT mentor, student research topics were not prescribed and choices regarding research venues and methods were not limited. Yet, students also had access to a research group with specialized knowledge in educational leadership that stimulated ideas on topics of significance for practitioners. Such dynamics of guidance and negotiation placed the mentor, in particular, but the peers as well in the role of a year-round motivational coach. Again, such benefits are emphasized in the hybrid mentoring model. In contrast, formal cohorts tend to be somewhat prescriptive in nature and restrictive in the outlook communicated about research and methodology (Maher, et al., 2004).

Based upon the WITs’ feedback, this cohort model has been effective in achieving its objectives, and in such areas as problem solving and mutual support. As Bruffee (1999) attests, “Professionals all learn collaboratively when they work together on focused problems with no certain resolution” (p. xiii). Bruffee also describes generic processes that build the positive synergy of support groups. These include treating individual projects as interdependent learning

opportunities and promoting peer mentoring through writing rituals and honest critique. These practices were thoroughly supported by the WIT cohort.

Moreover, while doctoral mentoring models support students academically, they can also encourage them to achieve broader personal goals. In fact, without such an intervention as the WIT cohort, the majority of doctoral students in the program to which this cohort is situated take far too long to complete the doctoral program or fail altogether. As a testament to its value, one WIT shared, “I just didn’t know where to turn, and I felt lost with no one to guide me who really knew the system. I was considering giving up because I didn’t know what else to do.”

Confirmation arose from a serendipitous event that occurred simultaneously during the timeframe of this study. An independent doctoral evaluation that was conducted onsite by qualified scholars from outside the university concluded, upon having interviewed WIT students and reviewed the completed dissertations that the institution was to consider this mentoring cohort a “model program.” Further, in the report submitted to the college, it was stated that the entire doctoral program in educational leadership would benefit from reflecting the tenets, approaches, and structures of the WIT cohort.

Implications for Doctoral Education and Scholar-Practitioner

Clearly, as Horn (2001) has asserted, the mentoring cohort model is a precious resource in higher education. When applied to the development of scholar-practitioner leaders, as in the case of the WIT program, the process of “generative dialogue” can, among other benefits, promote improved “habits of thinking and feeling” (Horn, 2002, p. 89). Unfortunately, in schools of education the cohort model is still insufficiently utilized and, especially where “noninstitutionalized” in educational leadership programs and others as well, lacks adequate support. As a result, many graduate faculty may question the expanded role of the professor as instructor and advisor, as well as mentoring cohort leader. Such reluctance is expected. Therefore, in order for cohort mentoring groups to form and thrive, academic institutions must formally support these. Those who engage in doctoral supervision know that it is a complex and demanding mentoring activity and involves a long-term commitment to individual students in their ongoing development as scholar-practitioner leaders. Professors who are active as dissertation chairs, then, bear a heavy mentoring responsibility and are thus more harshly impacted by lack of incentive or compensation.

The success of doctoral education within universities—on which institutions are highly dependent but not inclined to officially recognize—forces faculty to go above and beyond to mentor students. Without the necessary support for assisting mentees throughout their programs and candidacy as dissertation writers, faculty carry out this mission of their respective universities relying

solely (or mostly) on the intrinsic rewards of doing so. These dynamics tend to be compounded for mentors where mentees are assigned to them, not personally selected (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000).

Obviously, both formal and informal cohorts are not a panacea to addressing all of the challenges faced in applied doctoral programs. Nevertheless, cohorts promise significant learning gains to their participants and within structured as well as naturally occurring mentoring contexts that usually forge close connections among students and with faculty. For this reason, semiformal or informal cohorts should be used to extend existing mentoring networks; substantive dialogical interaction through which meaning is subjected to critical reflection and shared construction is an essential mode of learning for scholars and future leaders. At the same time, existing practices must be evaluated—those that are successful should continue, those that are ineffectual, phased out. With further study in and support of doctoral cohort development, both pedagogical and institutional practices could be improved.

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