Mentoring from the inside out: the mentor and mentee experience of a library professional mentoring relationship

Ms Annie Yee, AALIA
Liaison Librarian, RMIT University Library
Building 28, Level 6
368 Swanston Street, Melbourne,
Victoria 3000, Australia
annie.yee@rmit.edu.au

Dr Michael Robinson
Chief Executive Officer, CAVAL
4 Park Drive, Bundoora
Victoria 3083, Australia
michael.robinson@caval.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the different perspectives, observations and experiences of a mentor and mentee brought together in a library professional mentoring program in Victoria, Australia.

The CAVAL Cross Institutional Mentoring Program originated from a mentoring scheme initially developed by Monash University Library in 2010, in partnership with the State Library of Victoria. Management of the program was subsequently taken up by CAVAL – the Australian library consortium – and in 2014 comprised 40 mentoring relationships between staff from seven Victorian university libraries and the State Library.

Mentoring programs of this type can offer opportunities for effective mid-career reflection, exploration and change, as well as the sharing of experience and expertise to assist mentees to develop their own management skills and professional capabilities. However, much depends on the aims and intentions of the mentoring relationship, the understandings and expectations of both mentor and mentee, and the dynamics of the mentoring interaction itself. Rather than being a “teacher-pupil” relationship, successful mentoring is drawn not only from the mentor’s diverse experiences and willingness to share, but also from the trust and openness developed between mentor and mentee, and how the mentee can relate this to his or her own situation. In many respects, it is up to the mentee to identify needs and interests, and to use the mentor as a sounding board for personal reflection, understanding and growth.
Drawing on diaries and notes kept of the meetings between the authors in their roles as mentee and mentor respectively, this paper will offer an insight into the development of the mentoring relationship. In this case from a fluid and ambiguous start to constructive and tangible outcomes. In particular, the paper will explore the reflections and observations of both the mentee and the mentor about their roles, expectations and outcomes of the program.

The paper will conclude by reflecting on the potential for managed mentoring programs in the Asian library context. In a region where the extent of professional development opportunities varies significantly, the establishment of mentoring networks may offer a realistic and sustainable option for developing the management and leadership skills of the next generation of library professionals.

**Keywords:** Mentoring, lifelong learning, RMIT University Library, CAVAL, information science, professional staff development

1. **INTRODUCTION**

1.1 **Mentoring & professional development**

Traditionally, we have understood mentoring as the wiser, older and patient mentor guiding and shaping the lives of a much younger protégé or mentee. These days, we see a more interactive process whereby the mentee plays a more significant role in setting the objectives, looking to the mentor for support, guidance and opportunities for professional development. Mentoring in current times cuts across gender, age and seniority. In reverse mentoring for example, a younger less experienced staff could be mentoring a more senior staff in technology.

Mentoring creates opportunities for staff to interact and participate in professional activities which may not be possible, especially in large organizations. It runs alongside good supervision and management to provide the optimum environment for professional growth.

There is no shortage of material written on the subject of mentoring. The types of programs, current trends and their success appears in journal articles, organisations’ in-house publications, schools and semi-government papers as well as in government professional development plans. However, not much has been written from a mentor and mentee perspective. This paper presents the mentor’s and mentee’s observations of the relationship, their reflection, challenges and rewards through the mentoring process.
1.2 **CAVAL**

The context for the development of the mentoring relationship which is the subject of this paper is a formal cross-institutional mentoring program, coordinated and facilitated by the Australian library consortium CAVAL.

CAVAL is a not-for-profit consortium of eleven Australian academic libraries, which has as its core mission the provision of benefit to Australian and New Zealand libraries through nurturing and facilitating co-operative activities. CAVAL has been in existence for over 35 years, and over that time has developed a range of tailored products and services for the benefit of its members and for other libraries in the region. One of its most durable programs is the CAVAL Reciprocal Borrowing Program, which for much of CAVAL’s history has provided the staff and students of member institutions with an effective system for accessing and borrowing from the libraries of other members. In addition, CAVAL owns and administers the purpose-built CARM (CAVAL Archival and Research Material) storage facility, preserving and providing access to close to a million research volumes deposited into the CAVAL Shared Collection by member libraries, for the benefit of both present and future generations of researchers.

Beyond this, CAVAL offers services on a fee for service basis in areas as diverse as the supply of Languages Other Than English material, the cataloguing of print materials in over 80 different languages, the storage of library and museum collections on a leased basis (in addition to the member collaborative storage described above), the support of library resource sharing software and hardware products, the digitizing of print materials and the provision of training and consultancy services.

As academic libraries evolve, CAVAL constantly seeks new ways in which it can add value to the mix of services it offers, and in turn benefit its member libraries and their users. In the recent past this has included projects such as the development of a resource sharing network of libraries utilizing the Relais International D2D unmediated discovery, request and delivery software, formally launched as CAVALborrow. Often, initiatives such as these are driven by the needs of the membership and gaps in their service provision, and aim to achieve greater benefit at less cost through a co-operative rather than individual approach.

1.3 **Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program**

The Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program began in 2010 as an initiative of one member – Monash University Library – seeking to both provide professional development opportunities for staff and to build up the mentoring skills of its leadership. In its initial form, the program consisted of seven mentor-mentee relationships within the Library, and based on its success a mentoring partnership was subsequently established with the State Library of Victoria, to provide a greater range of opportunities, experience and perspectives. On the basis of further positive feedback from participants, Monash sought to engage other Victorian universities to broaden the program, and to enlist the support of CAVAL in managing and
coordinating the program on their behalf. Since then, the program has continued to grow so that by 2014 an additional six CAVAL member institutions had joined the program, with 40 mentoring partnerships established. The relationship discussed in this paper was one of those partnerships.

1.4 Program implementation & management

The aim of the Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program is to provide professional development opportunities through facilitating mentoring relationships for a range of mostly middle and junior professional staff from participating libraries. In an approach typical for a CAVAL program, the objective has also been to offer these opportunities through collaboration, in a relatively low cost and sustainable way. As a service to members, CAVAL was responsible for the management of the program overall, administered the selection and pairing of mentors and mentees, and engaged a consultant to lead the training and briefing sessions. The actual mentoring activity, however, was substantively between staff of participating libraries which indirectly absorbed staff costs through time release for mentor-mentee sessions. In this way, the actual cost of the program overall was minimal, despite there being 40 pairs active at the same time.

The Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program in 2014 began with CAVAL seeking expressions of interest in participation from member institutions. From this, it was established that seven of CAVAL’s eleven members were committed to the program, amplified by the addition of CAVAL itself and the continued participation of the State Library of Victoria. Each institution was then tasked with seeking applications from amongst their own management and staff to be either mentees or mentors, on the proviso that each institution could only enroll as many mentees in the program as they could also supply mentors. A committee drawn from participants and CAVAL undertook the process of matching mentees with suitable mentors, using for guidance their relative backgrounds and experience, as well as the interests and objectives of the mentees, to identify and put forward potential partnerships. These were then reviewed by both mentor and mentee in each case, and if accepted by both, the relationship could formally commence.

Before mentoring sessions began, the two cohorts of mentees and mentors were taken through a preparatory training program with a consultant selected for her experience in this field. The objective of this was to prepare participants for their role (either as mentors or mentees), to introduce participants to the concepts of mentoring relationships, to equip them with skills and understanding of their responsibilities, and to discuss mutual expectations and possible pitfalls. From previous mentoring programs, this has been viewed as essential to promoting the effectiveness of the mentoring relationships, as it is intended to give
participants a clear and realistic understanding of both their respective roles and the boundaries of the mentoring process.

Beyond this, it was left to the initiative of the mentee to initiate meetings and communication with the mentor, and to agree on the period of the partnership, frequency and type of contact, level of confidentiality and above all the key goals and objectives for the mentoring. Overall, this iteration of the CAVAL Mentoring Program ran for approximately six months, from June to December 2014.

2. THE MENTORING PROCESS

2.1 Mentoring from the Inside

The remainder of this paper focusses on the mentoring experience from the point of view of the authors in their roles as mentee (Annie Yee) and mentor (Michael Robinson) in one of the 40 mentoring partnerships undertaken in the 2014 Program. We began by looking at the objectives and expectations of the mentee as the driver of the relationship, and then contrasted this against the mentor’s expectations of the outcomes from the partnership. Following from this, we then compared those expectations with the actual experience for both parties, and the outcomes which have emerged from the partnership.

2.2 The Mentee’s objectives

RMIT University Library had always participated actively in CAVAL programs and this mentoring program was no exception. When the program was relaunched in 2014, RMIT University Library was undergoing significant changes. The educational and information management industry was evolving through a fast changing technological environment, together with changes in government funding.

With changing environment comes new opportunities and it is time to reassess my own career development and re-position myself in a changing environment. Questions like, will changes in the Library’s service environment affect my current role and how I can re-position myself in a changing environment were important considerations for my own career development.

With a mentor in a senior position, I hoped to learn how he networked and have effective engagements with people in senior positions. He could also act as a sounding board for me to discuss future career moves in a confidential capacity. Although mentors are not responsible for my advancement or promotion (Kuyper-Rushing, 2001), I cannot help thinking this arrangement will open doors for me. What better opportunity than this, to be assigned a mentor who is senior in a large organization through the context of a formal program?
I also see it as my responsibility to ‘put back’ into the organization and mentor the next generation of new graduates in information management. Although I have held various senior roles in other industries overseas and participated casually in mentoring and peer partnership arrangements, I still felt ill equipped, having not gone through any formal mentoring programs. I wanted to experience a mentoring relationship in an organized program, and thereafter to be able to mentor others effectively. Hence I signed up to be a mentee rather hesitantly and with great apprehension.

2.3 The Mentor’s objectives

As the Chief Executive Officer of CAVAL, my personal objectives for engaging in the Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program were perhaps different to a number of other participants. Part of my interest was driven by CAVAL’s overall management and “sponsorship” of the program, not least as this was the third year in which the co-ordination of the program had been undertaken on behalf of members. The participant evaluations of the previous two programs had been very positive and had led to the program being conducted for another year, and my personal involvement at one level reflected CAVAL’s continued commitment. I was also curious to experience the program from the inside, as it were, and to continue to ensure that CAVAL staff had access to the program as mentees, through us also making available an equivalent number of mentors.

2.4 The Mentee’s expectations

The waiting period to find out who my mentor was unnerving, although from literature I understood that the perfect mentor does not exist (Stewart, 2011). Could he or she be one of my own institution’s senior or executive staff? Will I be able to relate to my mentor? Would I have the time to commit to make it succeed?

The first workshop for mentees set the scene on what mentoring is. Being a mentee does not mean sitting back and passively receiving guidance from the mentor. It is really up to the mentee to drive the learning relationship without being assertive or aggressive. The mentee needs to be prepared to make the most out of the meetings. In our case, my mentor’s time is very valuable, being a CEO of a large organization. Consequently, I made every effort to come prepared with constructive suggestions, enthusiasm and willingness to learn from self-reflection and feedback.

Questions set out in our program briefing notes (Betts, 2014) guided me along during the early days of the program.
Some of the questions I reflected on were:

- Why do I need a mentor?
- What sort of background should my mentor know about me?
- What are my career goals?
- What do I see as my major strengths and areas of growth?
- Where do I see myself in the future?

2.5 The Mentor’s expectations

For the majority of participants in the Program, both mentors and mentees were drawn from the academic libraries of the CAVAL member institutions. My case again was somewhat different, and this in turn may have coloured my expectations of my role as a mentor and the value that I could bring to a mentoring relationship in this context. Although I also possess a background in academic libraries, my professional career in Australia, Vietnam and Hong Kong has been quite varied, ranging from the project management of library development projects overseas through to my current position as Chief Executive and leader of a library consortium. As a result, I was not confident at the start of the program of the value that this experience could bring to any mentee I might possibly be paired with, nor whether it would be of much relevance to mentees in the program. Much of this experience, I assumed, was not only unusual for an academic librarian but also specific to the kinds of professional roles I have taken on.

This concern was compounded by the fact that I had never previously entered into a formal mentoring arrangement, either as a mentee or mentor, and consequently had little idea of what was expected of me. My own mentoring experiences had largely been informal, observing and learning from my superiors and colleagues on the job about leadership style and characteristics, and how to approach certain management situations: - in some cases, the value of these observations was in what approaches or behaviour to avoid! Taken as a whole however, these were largely unstructured and casual experiences where my “mentor” may not have even been aware of their influence on me. When asked to act as a mentor in the CAVAL program therefore, I not only had no idea what to expect, but little idea of the contribution or value I could bring to the mentoring relationship, nor how I could go about offering this.

This is where in many respects the preliminary training provided to mentors in the program was invaluable. Through this, we were introduced to the fundamental concepts of mentoring in a structured framework, the role of “developmental” mentoring which involves a combination of roles and skills for the mentor according to the situation, and the concept of learning centered mentoring, where the mentor plays a less directive and more facilitative role, while the mentee is more directive in their learning needs.

My other positive experience at the commencement of the mentoring program concerned my pairing with a mentee. This process was conducted by a steering committee for the program, and I was both pleasantly surprised and slightly apprehensive at the same time to be advised that my mentee was a mature professional with career experience not only in
libraries but in several other fields as well. Although this was a plus in that my mentee appeared to have similar interests to myself, what could I possibly “teach” her?

3. THE EXPERIENCE

3.1 The Mentee’s experience

Following the general mentor and mentee briefings at the end of June, our first discussion took place at my work place in mid-July, where we exchanged views of what to expect from the relationship, and began to share a little of our backgrounds. It was at this point that our formal “Mentoring Partnership Agreement” was established.

During our initial discussions and planning for how to achieve my objectives for participation in this program, I encountered several issues that made me quickly change focus. Firstly, my mentor had not mentored before whilst I had, although in casual arrangements overseas. I had many years working in various senior roles in various industries and had taken responsibility for my own career development with new initiatives. My mentor had been very pro-active to grasp opportunities opened to him within the industry profession. His ability to network and work at senior levels is not an area that I could achieve in the short time that I now have left in my career life. His personality and aptitude is also not something that I could learn from and apply to my current situation within the scope of this mentoring program. At the same time, the current RMIT organizational structure may not provide opportunities for my desired career move. To progress to the next level that I want in my career seemed difficult within the scope of my abilities in my current environment. However, it was a great relief that I could articulate these concerns with my mentor confidentially with professional integrity.

I was also very aware that my mentor is taking time out of his busy schedule as a CEO to meet. I constantly reflected not only on why I am in the program, but what will my mentor get out of mentoring me? How will he benefit if we stick to my original objectives? How can I make this a rewarding experience for both of us? Then there is the question of work life balance for me.

While we had meetings, coffees and workshop events, the success of the relationship has much to do with the process of continuous learning, reflections and new directions where necessary. Journaling helps to capture ideas and thoughts that are helpful for future reflection and as a point of reference. “It forces systematic reflection, helps clarify thinking, stimulates new insights, assists you in remembering specific details and information, captures the
richness of your learning as you go along, and becomes a record of your experience that you can refer to time and time again’ (Zachary & Fischler, 2009).

It is a good practice to note not only what transpired at meetings but also own reflections and plans. I then used action items from previous entries in the journal to work out our next meeting agendas. The table below is a simple format that I designed and saved to my Google Drive for easy access.

Table 1: Diary of a Mentee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>PLACE</th>
<th>DISCUSSION, ACTIVITIES, REFLECTIONS</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was very aware that it is my responsibility to keep my focus on learning from my mentor and while my mentor provides the support and vision, it is up to me as mentee to capture new directions if previous objectives are not working out. This I realized sometime at our second meeting. Although we have discussed learning goals and objectives and signed off a ‘Mentoring Partnership Agreement’ with my mentor, the program was not that rigid that we needed to stick by the agreement. Such agreements only served to make us committed to the partnership. It provided guidelines on how we could work towards our objectives. By the second meeting, I was very aware that I needed to refocus and move away from initial goals quickly and proposed another objective.

Given the fact that my mentor had shared about his extensive involvement in the South East Asian region library environment, I saw this as an avenue that I could piggy back on. I took the initiative to search for appropriate conferences in the region. At the third meeting, I proposed a joint paper, suggesting various conferences that we could present. We then quickly moved onto our new objective with renewed energy. My mentor’s experience and knowledge of libraries in the South East Asian region boosted my confidence to co-author and co-present at the 16th Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians Conference (CONSAL). This was a real tangible outcome of our mentoring relationship. Presenting this paper will be a rewarding closure to our formal mentoring relationship.

3.2 The Mentor’s experience

From my initial meeting with Annie as my mentee, my experience of our mentoring relationship developed and evolved as we progressed over the four months of the formal program. Many of Annie’s goals and objectives for the program were focused on developing strategies for career development, and as much of my own career has been spent outside the mainstream of academic librarianship which is the context of Annie’s own career, I was not sure how relevant or applicable observations based on this would be.

However, what subsequently emerged was a dialogue in which I began not only to recognize the value of my own experience and the perspectives emerging from this, but also
to respect, engage with and indeed learn from the experience and perceptions of my mentee. It quickly became evident that the mentoring process was not simply one of dispensing advice based on the development objectives of the mentee – providing recommendations on networking and pursuing particular career goals, for example - but more one of Annie discovering where her priorities lay through testing ideas and assumptions against my own views and experience. Through this process, finding “solutions” to her problems of career development very quickly exhausted itself as an interaction between us, and was replaced by a simpler and perhaps less didactic sharing of career experiences. This focused not only on her career ambitions but also balanced these against other equally important aspects of her life as well.

This process was also reflective in that, in drawing on aspects of my own career, it caused me to consider my own situation and to think differently about some aspects of what I do. In a relatively short space of time, our interactions came to be mutual sharing of ideas and experience, from which we both drew insights and understandings.

4. OBSERVATIONS AND OUTCOMES

4.1 The Mentee’s observations and outcomes

I believe the success of a well-defined mentoring program like ours was based on three processes:

- Pairing mentors and mentees from different institutional volunteers
- The workshops – networking opportunities, including speakers from outside the program
- Regular meetings between mentor and mentee. “….the one on one relationship is the real heart of mentoring” (Van Avery, 1992)

Catching up regularly, whether face to face or virtually, is the heart of the mentoring experience for me.

The following are some of my own conclusions as to how to make the mentoring relationship work effectively.

Know what form of communication works best for you and your mentor.

Successful mentoring requires deliberate activities and regular catch ups. Early in the program, we scheduled times to meet frequently but often had to reschedule.
Time is a challenge and always will be. We were both committed to make the mentoring a success, but with work and personal commitments, it meant we had to reschedule our meetings often. Good communication ethics and knowing what sort of communication tool worked best for the both of us made it easier for me to reach out to my mentor. We used emails, Skype and text messages when we could not meet face to face due to time constraints and scheduling conflicts, and this enabled the dialogue to continue, even when face to face meetings were not possible.

**Learn from your mentor’s career journeys**

As a mentee, I recognized that the times when we met were valuable, and would listen intently, focusing on our discussions, my mentor’s feedback, suggestions and thinking outside the box. The initial first meeting - getting to know each other, sharing of life and career stories, made the relationship special. There were always some gems from the stories my mentor tells me. A rewarding experience was hearing from my mentor how CAVAL developed over the years and some of the business that it is now engaged in. I find this interesting not only because of my business background, but realizing how transferable the library profession can be.

**Focus on the positives**

It may seem that the mentoring process did not work successfully for us if based only on the fact that my initial goals were not met. However, our mentoring relationship has evolved from an ambiguous start to a tangible outcome resulting in this conference paper. I had a very rewarding experience, even when not all my objectives for participating have been met. In fact, my confidence and self-esteem has increased in co-authoring this paper, made possible by the program. This has been an empowering experience. My respect for my mentor has progressed from a ‘teacher-pupil’ relationship to one of professional friendship built on mutual respect and commitment to shared values. It has further evolved to an informal relationship that will continue well after the program is over. I may never be completely ready to mentor but I think it is about time now to pay it forward.

**4.2 The Mentor’s observations and outcomes**

As mentioned earlier, I began this process as an “observer” of the Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program in my capacity as the CEO of CAVAL, curious about its benefits and shortcomings from the perspective of the future management of the program. My experience as a participant has been quite different from my initial expectations in the ease and fluency with which our interactions took place, and the way in which they lead to conclusions and outcomes not only for my mentee but for me as well. Having been initially concerned that in my role as a mentor I may be required to act as a “magician” - conjuring up solutions to career problems — I discovered that the value of mentoring lay in the space it provides for neutral one on one interactions, questioning, reflecting and occasionally challenging one’s own assumptions.
5. Conclusion

The response to the CAVAL Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program has in general been very positive, and while not every partnership’s story is similar to our own, many positive interactions have resulted from the program.

In many respects, it can be envisaged that this type of mentoring program could be applied to only across institutions as in the CAVAL program, but across cultures as well. For example, developing cross-institutional mentoring programs across higher education libraries in Asian countries could be anticipated to offer the same benefits of providing professional development opportunities for staff at relatively low cost through the collaboration of participating libraries. Alternatively, such opportunities may exist between the staff from institutions in different or neighbouring countries, offering a rich exchange of different organizational and local cultures and knowledge. Such opportunities for library professionals may not happen in their home working environment. Technology and the use of social media networking software may also provide a sustainable option, simulating face to face meetings when it is impossible to meet face to face. Such a program implemented will be of benefit to library professionals in our rapidly transforming industry across Asia.

At the conclusion of the mentoring program, it was evident that the mentee could and would now continue with the mentoring culture. This paper is a rewarding tangible outcome for both of us. We have developed deeper levels of trust. Trust being the key to the success of the relationship (Kuyper-Rushing, 2001). We hope that the success of our mentoring relationship will encourage similar professional development amongst library professionals in the South East Asian region. Kuyper-Rushing (2001) pointed out that ‘mentors serve in an advisory capacity only and the establishment of a mentoring relationship should not be seen as a guarantee of advancement or career success for either protégé or mentor’. However, from our experience, formal mentoring programs do provide opportunities fostering networking that would not happen naturally in everyday work environment. As mentors prepare mentees to take on the role of mentors for the future, the mentoring culture will continue to survive. In the South East Asian library context, formal programs and networking across countries is an exciting development for the next generation of library professionals.
References